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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“[A] better calm / of meet companionship”: Augusta Webster’s (Re)Vision of
Victorian Wifehood and Marriage

by

Jennifer Sabatelli

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

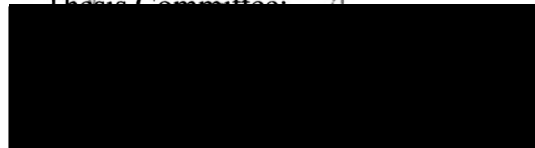
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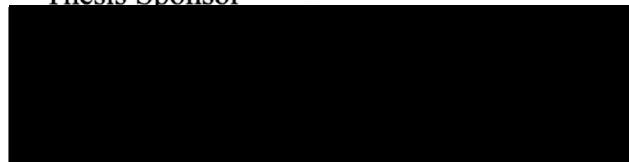
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Abstract

That nineteenth-century female poets appropriated genre conventions for their own purposes is not a new idea; *how* and *why* they did so, though, are ongoing points of conjecture for feminist scholars. The following is an exploration of how the Victorian poet Julia Augusta Webster appropriated genre—more specifically the dramatic monologue and the closet drama—to advance her own feminist agenda and provoke social change, particularly with regard to the Victorian marriage institution.

Part I consists of a paired analysis of two lesser-known dramatic monologues by Webster, “Sister Annunciata” and “The Happiest Girl in the World.” Both works offer compelling critiques of Victorian wifehood and marriage and reveal Webster’s empathy for the plight of the Victorian bride. Close analysis demonstrates: (1) that each speaker possesses desires, especially those of a sexual nature, that defy the societal expectations of her marital status, (2) that each speaker feels compelled to suppress and overcompensate for such desires, mainly through expressions and performances of false contentment; and (3) that Webster advocates for social change by portraying these performative acts as detrimental to a woman’s sense of self and, in the case of Annunciata, her very survival.

Part II, which focuses on the closet drama *A Woman Sold*, establishes once again how Webster’s choice and appropriation of form helps to shape an overt, trenchant critique of Victorian wifehood and marriage. Much attention is given to how Webster’s portrayal of Eleanor is meant to evoke sympathy, not judgment or contempt—that her mercenary marriage is not the result of her own weakness or selfishness, but rather the coercion of the Victorian gender system itself. Also highlighted are complementary

aspects of *A Woman Sold* and the two dramatic monologues in Part I, the goal being to argue that Eleanor's performativity—her suppression of desires and acts of feigned contentment as Lady Boycott—is detrimental to not only her sense of self, but also her very survival.

Part III gives closer examination to the potentially dissatisfying conclusion of *A Woman Sold*. While Eleanor is the heroine of the drama, it is Mary, her friend, who arouses (or should arouse) readers' attention and contemplation; it is Mary's account of her relationship/dynamic with her fiancé that hijacks Act II. *A Woman Sold* is powerful and distinctive in that Webster does not merely expose/critique Victorian wifedom for what it was and should not be. More significantly, *A Woman Sold* serves as a fictional antecedent and complement to the bold, progressive sociopolitical essays Webster penned for the *Examiner* (and later compiled and published as *A Housewife's Opinions*) in that it offers readers a vision—Webster's vision—of what marriage *should* be. Parallels are drawn between the closet drama and essays in *A Housewife's Opinions* to illustrate the progression and intensification of Webster's social and political agenda.

“A BETTER CALM / OF MEET COMPANIONSHIP”: AUGUSTA WEBSTER’S
(RE)VISION OF VICTORIAN WIFEHOOD AND MARRIAGE

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of English

by

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To my husband, Chris, for your love and support—for seeing me through moments of stress and self-doubt; for understanding my painstaking quest to find just the right word(s); and for believing that I am more capable than I consider myself to be.

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In a letter to Edmund Gosse on May 19, 1876, Julia Augusta Webster wrote the following about her life as a wife: "I don't suppose I am the only woman living a happy life (so far as all else a woman can want for her best happiness goes) who knows what it is to feel a longing for a prison or a convent that she might at least now and then have the certainty of a half hour's unbroken time to think her own thoughts in" (Newey, "British Matron" 132). Prominently displayed in this passage is her personal desire to privilege artistic pursuits over the "trifling" (Webster, *HO* 160) domestic and social responsibilities that make "tatters of her time" (161). More inclusive and far-reaching (in its display of social consciousness) is the implicit correlation between a woman's happiness and the ability to "think her own thoughts." Even Webster, a woman with a happy marriage and an awe-inspiring résumé of professional achievements—poet, dramatist, novelist, and essayist; literary critic and Greek translator; suffragist and educational reformer—had a personal understanding of and deep empathy for the Victorian wife's limitations and suppression. As she laments, the duty of the Victorian matron was more often than not to "think nothing, only hear him [her husband] think" ("Happiest Girl" 18). Webster's work as an early campaigner for women's suffrage, as well as her service as an elected official of the London School Board, speaks to her knowledge of and resistance to such inequality. So does her writing.

Webster was one of the most prolific and critically acclaimed poets of her time, male or female. Her dramatic monologues were critically hailed as being in the same league as Robert Browning's. Her entry in the 1899 *Dictionary of Literary Biography* states, "Mrs. Webster's verse entitles her to a high place among English poets...Some of her lyrics deserve a place in every anthology of modern English poetry" (Hickok).

Christina Rossetti considered her name (among women poets) to be “by far the most formidable of those known to me” (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 242). Yet, soon after her death in 1894, Webster disappeared from the cultural landscape, and this would last for nearly a century. In the 1990s, feminist critics began to revive her from the dust of the archives, contending that her socially and politically minded writing has just as much relevance today as during the 19th century. Over the past 25 years, interest has grown in rediscovering the modernity and the aesthetic and political value of Webster’s writing, yet that interest is still emerging.

Critics wishing to explore Webster’s feminist agenda as a writer have tended to concentrate on three of her dramatic monologues: “Circe,” “Medea in Athens,” and her most anthologized piece, “A Castaway,” which is voiced by a relatively high-class prostitute who biting (but sympathetically) exposes the social conditions and strictures that contributed to her “fall.” “The Happiest Girl in the World” and “Sister Annunciata” are two lesser-known monologues, yet their presentation of wifely constriction and debilitation is essential to a comprehensive understanding of Webster’s feminist politics and aesthetics. (If “Happiest Girl” is discussed by critics, it is usually a minor tangent [1-3 paragraphs] in an essay about one of the three aforementioned monologues. “Sister Annunciata” has garnered even less consideration, a fact that can be attributed much more to its length [roughly 1,500 lines] than to a lack of merit.¹ Without due exposure or accessibility, the poem has been regrettably overlooked and/or forgotten.) *A Woman Sold*, a closet drama, has similarly untapped potential; other than Patricia Rigg, who offers a scant summary of the work in her biography of Webster, Susan Brown and

¹ If it does appear in compilations of Webster’s work (never making its way into general anthologies of Victorian poetry or women’s writing), it is severely excerpted.

Albert Pionke appear to be the only contemporary scholars to dedicate critical attention to this closet drama.² *A Woman Sold* stands as a beautiful complement to “Happiest Girl” and “Sister Annunciata” in its examination and critique of Victorian marriage.

In an effort to “cast the net wider,” to broaden the context, understanding, and appreciation of Webster’s feminist efforts/agenda via her writing, I will first explore how all three of these lesser-known works serve to expose female confinement and repression, specifically that of the Victorian middle-class wife. Each speaker possesses desires, especially those of a sexual nature, that defy the expectations that accompany their social positions. Each speaker feels compelled to suppress and overcompensate for such desires, mainly through expressions and performances of false contentment. Through each of these works, Webster advocates for social change by portraying these performative acts—these ventures at being, as Annunciata states, “another self” (199) or, as the speaker of “Happiest Girl” states, “so other than I was” (15)—as detrimental to a woman’s sense of self and, in the case of Annunciata, her very survival.

Integral to this exploration is a consideration of genre, for as Melissa Valiska Gregory proposes, “Webster, as a poet who made important contributions in several genres, and who, as Patricia Rigg has shown, was deeply immersed in poetic theory, invites a more wide-ranging discussion between feminism and genre studies” (28). Webster herself contends that form is intertwined with, not detached from or ancillary to, content. In an essay titled “The Translation of Poetry,” she insists, “In poetry the form of

² Katherine Newey, author of *Women’s Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain*, confirms that “in spite of recent renewed interest in Webster’s dramatic monologue” (119), there has been “little study of Webster’s drama” (119). The issue is larger than Webster herself; the closet drama itself (as a genre) has been largely neglected by contemporary critics. As Karen Raber notes, the genre “has not accrued the layers of complex social and literary analysis that have marked the last three decades of drama criticism in general” (13), only recently attracting the attention of feminist scholars and critics in particular.

the thought is part of the thought, not merely its containing body” (*HO* 61-2). I will explore how Webster’s penchant for genre experimentation resulted in an increasingly more substantial critique of the inequities and repressiveness of the Victorian marriage institution. More specifically, I will demonstrate that the dramatic monologue “obliquely but firmly reflects the poet’s external social commitments” (Pearsall 79), and that in Webster’s hands, the closet drama allowed for a more explicit and directed attack due to its multiplicity of voices and perspectives. With regard to those earlier works—the dramatic monologues “Happiest Girl” and “Sister Annunciata”—Webster anticipates and complements arguments made not only in the closet drama but also in the blatantly critical sociopolitical essays in *A Housewife’s Opinions*, published at the height of Webster’s activism.³

It is with close consideration of Webster’s ideas about marriage in *A Housewife’s Opinions* that I intend to return to *A Woman Sold*, particularly the ending, which at first glance might be regarded as undermining a feminist reading. At the end of Act II, after eliciting our sympathy for the Victorian wife’s lack of autonomy and debilitating performativity, the protagonist, Eleanor, conscribes herself once again—*by choice* this time—to a future of suppressed desires and feigned contentment. Before we charge Webster with betraying or abandoning her cause, however, we must consider the context—why and to what end this choice is made. It is my contention that Eleanor’s act of self-sacrifice, her decision to preserve rather than disrupt her friend Mary’s

³ Marysa Demoor suggests (but does not expand upon *how*, as I intend to) that Webster’s earlier fictional works prepared for and complement these later prose works: “Webster openly confronted the reading public, as a woman, in her signed essays in the *Examiner* and in her political pamphlets, presenting them with her straightforward feminist views. Yet, before these had appeared she had written highly subversive poetry in which she had deconstructed the usual female stereotypes (such as that of the prostitute and that of the femme fatale) pointing at society’s neglect of a large number of its population and man’s inveterate egoism, thus preparing the ground for her own polemical essays” (139).

engagement to her former lover, Lionel, is a gesture toward progress, not regression.

Webster moves beyond satire and negative criticism in *A Woman Sold*; more than just an exposé of institutional coercion and suppression, the closet drama offers a positive re-visioning of Victorian marriage. Mary and Lionel's relationship exemplifies the kind of love—companionate love—that Webster depicts and advocates for in *A Housewife's Opinions*, and Eleanor's sacrifice will ensure its preservation and example. Thus, the resolution to *A Woman Sold* reinforces and strengthens (rather than problematizes) Webster's feminist agenda—taking on institutional injustice and, more importantly, offering hope and testimony of an alternative.

“To learn...an artificial bloom / Or die”: The Plight of Webster’s Married Monologists

That nineteenth-century female poets such as Webster appropriated genre conventions for their own purposes is not a new idea; *how* and *why* they did so, though, are ongoing points of conjecture for feminist scholars. To both validate and expand their recuperative efforts, several Webster critics, especially those focused on her dramatic monologues, have contributed to this debate. Isobel Armstrong, for example, discusses women’s use of the dramatic monologue as a vehicle for “masked critique” (372); given “the difficulties of acceptance experienced by women writers” (375), this genre provided “a disguise, a protection against self-exposure” (375). Much of the criticism that exists offers variations on the same theme—somewhat conservative conclusions regarding Webster’s intent and execution. Virginia Blain claims that dramatic forms offered female poets “the opportunity to inhabit less socially acceptable positions without taking direct responsibility for them” (9)—to not be confused as the “speaking ‘I’ of their poem[s]” (9). Angela Leighton argues that Webster uses the monologue “not to divulge the moral and emotional inconsistencies of the inner self, but to probe the borderlands between its social construction and its unknown potentiality...The self is thus presented as essentially a creature mirrored in the looking-glass of society, and Webster’s poems *do not try to break the glass*; they only set it at different angles” [emphasis added] (186).

Some critics appraise Webster’s use of the genre as more decidedly bold and activist, a means to take on and affect (rather than just reflect, as Leighton’s looking-glass metaphor implies) real world politics. Marysa Demoor briefly notes that Webster “adapted the dramatic monologue entirely to her own ends, giving it a distinctly feminist mission” (134). In the same vein, T. D. Olverson lauds Webster’s “clever adaptation of

the monologue form" (49) in "Taking on the Tradition: Augusta Webster's Feminist Revisionism" and claims that "Webster's political activism traverses her creative and critical writing to such an extent that she must be seen as one of the most politically driven and socially committed writers of the nineteenth century" (27). However, the suggestion that Webster's poems *do* in fact try to "break the glass" is presented most convincingly and comprehensively in Glennis Byron's "Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique."

In her essay, Byron criticizes the widespread exclusion of women writers from discourse on the dramatic monologue and, in response, argues how the form was repurposed and redefined by 19th century female poets. Byron positions Webster prominently in her opening paragraph, identifying her as "that key Victorian woman writer of monologues" (79). More importantly, she places emphasis on the dramatic monologue being appropriated by female poets as a means of "target[ing]...the systems that produce the speakers" (87) rather than the speakers themselves. To illustrate, Byron briefly compares Webster to Robert Browning. In short, whereas Browning's concerns are "primarily psychological" (86)—how a speaker is subject to "forces within itself" (86)—Webster's are "social and economic" (87)—how a speaker is subject to "forces outside itself" (86). To fulfill the objective of social critique, Webster exploits the strategy of "inhabiting the conventional in order to expose it" (88); she presents speakers who, through performances of admittedly feigned contentment, exhibit (and suffer from) "internalisation of the ideology that defines [them]" (88).

Performance is the key word here, as corroborated in similar claims by critics Cornelia Pearsall and Patricia Rigg. In her review essay "The Dramatic Monologue,"

Pearsall states, “[A] major feature of this poetic genre is its assumption of rhetorical efficacy” (68). Pearsall counters the long-held notion that dramatic monologists “invariably reveal far more than they intend” (68). Quite the opposite, monologists often *intend to reveal*. Speakers “desire to achieve some purpose” (68), and, in reading dramatic monologues, “we must ask what each poem seeks to perform, what processes it seeks to set in motion or ends it seeks to attain” (68). Since this form “seeks to dramatize, as well as to cause, performative effects” (79), it is especially useful to poets like Webster who are “attempting to create reactions and larger social transformations in the world outside the poem” (79). Though Rigg endorses the term “monodrama” as opposed to “dramatic monologue,”⁴ she agrees that “the speaker...adopts a series of poses” that “reflect the inner life of the speaker at the same time that they indicate the social, political, and philosophical climate in which the speaker exists” (“Social Politics” 83). These “poses” allow Webster to “touch on the economic realities of the Victorian woman” (88) and, as Byron maintains, target the system rather than what (or whom) it produces.

The plight of the middle-class Victorian wife is skillfully enacted and critiqued in two particular monologues of interest, “The Happiest Girl in the World” and “Sister Annunciata.” Both speakers, in their roles as wives (whether present or soon-to-be, literal or metaphorical), must suppress their natural desires, especially those which defy

⁴ Debate ensues (among Webster critics and on a more macrocosmic scale) as to what terminology to use to establish this poetic form’s distinguishing characteristics. Rigg endorses “monodrama” because, as Emily Harrington notes, “it accounts for the speaker’s awareness of her fluctuating emotional states and her attempts at emotional self-manipulation” (194). Other espoused terms include “mask lyric,” “dramatic lyrics,” and “lyrical dramas.” I have chosen to use “dramatic monologue” throughout for, as Herbert F. Tucker maintains, it is “a generic term that has practical usefulness” and “does not seem to have been impaired by the failure of literary historians and taxonomists to achieve consensus in its definition” (qtd. in Pearsall, p. 69). A similar debate over terminology exists with regard to the closet drama; Brown, Pionke, Raber, and Willson favor “closet drama,” while some critics espouse the terms “verse drama” (Newey, Flint, and Sutphin) or “poetic drama” (Mermin).

Victorian feminine ideals of sexual purity and passivity. As a result, both women feign contentment with their stifling positions in order to survive the mental and physical confinement. Feelings of ambivalence and unrest manifest themselves into active performances of self-renunciation in an effort to appease and, more importantly, withstand social expectations. Webster does indeed “inhabit the conventional in order to expose it” (Byron 88); she advocates for social change by portraying these performative acts—instigated and perpetuated by *said* ideology and *not* by weak constitution or inherent character fallibility—as detrimental to a wife’s sense of self and, in cases such as Sister Annunciata’s, her very survival. It is Webster’s specific choice and use of genre—in this case, the dramatic monologue—that compels us, even as we witness the forethought and execution of such acts, to reserve judgment and react sympathetically to the “performers” because of, not in spite of, their complicity.

“Sister Annunciata” and “Happiest Girl” both begin with a shared emphasis on anniversaries related to marriage or betrothal. Part I of “Sister Annunciata” is titled “An Anniversary,” and the first words read, “MY wedding day!” (1). The occasion is the anniversary of Annunciata entering the convent and becoming a bride of Christ. Similarly (and significantly), each of the first three stanzas of “Happiest Girl” opens with the phrase “A week ago” (1), marking the one-week anniversary of the speaker’s betrothal. Both women find themselves alone with their thoughts, and it is during these quiet times of introspection that we gain privileged access to their memories, ruminations, desires, and confessions. Annunciata has been assigned by the Abbess to an all-night vigil, whereby she may “think upon [her] ancient life / With all its sins and follies, and prepare / To keep [her] festival for that good day / That wedded [her] out of

the world to Christ" (48-51). She instead spends her vigil indulging in memories of a past lover, rehashing the betrayal of her family that forced her current vocation, and questioning the sacrifices required to be a "bride of Christ." The unnamed speaker of "Happiest Girl" takes advantage of her fiancé's temporary absence to acknowledge her feelings of emotional emptiness and question the nature of passion and its compatibility (or rather incompatibility) with her future role. She admits, "I am almost glad / to have him now gone for this little while, / that I may think of him and tell myself / what to be his means, now that I am his" (7-10). One looks back on her former life, lamenting how she ended up in her present married state, while the other sits in troubled contemplation of her impending future as a bride. Yet, both are clearly discontented, and their monologues illustrate their concurrent and comparable "negotiations with confining, debilitating circumstances" (Shao 22).

Let us first turn to "Sister Annunciata" so that we may use it to inform our reading of "Happiest Girl."⁵ Rather than reposing in peaceful meditation during her anniversary

⁵ Since its publication, there has been disagreement among critics—in the little discussion that does exist—as to whether "Happiest Girl" reinforces or repudiates prescribed gender roles and social convention. Critics of the time perceived nothing ironic or disconcerting about the speaker's reflections; rather, most read it as a testament to young innocent love. The reviewer for the *Examiner* deemed it "one of the prettiest and simplest of [Webster's] modern pieces" (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 130) and considered it a rarity to find "thoughts so tender and true, expressed with so much feeling and in such melodious language" (130). Similarly, H. Buxton Forman noted how the poem exudes "so sweet and wholesome a sentiment so sweetly put forth" (Sutphin, *Augusta* 29)—quite unlike the "coarse power" (29) that he detected (and criticized) in much of Webster's poetry. He concludes, rather condescendingly, that "[o]ne is almost tempted to smile at the dear inconsequent girl" (29). Modern-day feminist critics, namely Isobel Armstrong, Patricia Rigg, and Christine Sutphin, have challenged such appraisals by exploring the ambivalence and inner turmoil of the speaker and thus the biting irony of the title. (See Sutphin, *Augusta* pp. 29-30 and "Heterosexual Desire" pp. 388-9; Rigg, "Social Politics" pp. 89-95; and Armstrong p. 374) Interestingly, though, not all contemporary critics agree. For example, E. Warwick Slinn offers this characterization of the speaker: "Engaged only a week, [she] *exults* in the *delighted anticipation* of devoting her life to a series of role relationships with her future husband" [emphasis added] (176). Another unexpectedly dissonant voice is that of Kathleen Hickok, who has been credited and praised for her "ground-breaking" (Leighton 1) attention to nineteenth-century women's poetry. Yet, surprisingly, she claims that "Happiest Girl" is a monologue of "youthful joy and optimism" (Hickok). The speaker's "hopes are not dashed" according to her; rather, it is merely the poem's "placement in the same volume with monologues of older, disillusioned speakers" that makes her "optimism appear ironic." I staunchly

vigil, Annunciata sits in envious contemplation of an imagined bride, a “simple happy wife, / Stolen from her husband’s sight a little while / To think how much she loved him” (1-3).⁶ She envisions this wife coming to her husband, “coaxing him” (9), “[s]unning her[self] boldly in his look of love” (11), and “facing him with unabashed fond eyes” (12). Amidst the “sexually loaded diction of this passage” (Shao 78), “coaxing” and “unabashed” are key descriptors; this imagined Victorian wife is an uncharacteristically active agent, unapologetic of her desires and bold in her pursuit of sexual fulfillment. With just this initial scenario, the poem “distinguishes itself from the Victorian laments over passive virgins lost to the cloister” (Fletcher 304), for Annunciata once experienced—and clearly still craves—a physical love that defies her forced state of celibacy. Sensing that she “went too far” (18) with her thoughts, though, Annunciata immediately censures herself, asking, “Am I sinning now / To think it?” (17-8). Critic Bing Shao is correct in noting that the nun’s “very thinking is imprisoned” (80), for “in response to each earthly thought she has, she immediately judges it critically and condemns it as sinful, like a prisoner being chastised by her guards” (80). Annunciata moves to suppress such carnal thoughts, praying that the Virgin Mary will pardon her “poor human want of human love / Hungry a moment and by weakness snared” (29). More importantly, she seeks solace in spiritual supremacy, claiming, “The bride of Christ is more than other women; / They have their happiness, I mine; but mine / Is it not of Heaven heavenly, theirs of earth, / And therefore tainted with earth’s curse of sin?” (19-

disagree with Hickok; the satirical tone of “Happiest Girl” can be substantiated and confirmed, especially through a paired reading with “Sister Annunciata.”

⁶ It is worth noting that Annunciata’s imagined bride is virtually an invocation of the speaker from “Happiest Girl,” who is “glad / to have [her fiancé] now gone for this little while” so that she may “think of him” and “what to be his means.”

23). This compensatory strategy garners only fleeting results, however. As she fears, she soon succumbs to the “poisonous sad sweet sin of looking back” (56).

As Annunciata “look[s] back,” she reflects upon the confining, debilitating circumstances of convent life and the “anguish” (1147) of submitting to a “new-learned will” (1148). She says, “Ah! I remember me / In the first days—when I was sad and restless / And seemed an alien in a hopeless world” (100-2). We learn that her vocation was orchestrated by her mother and uncle, who acted not only to save one dower⁷ but also to dissolve her disadvantageous relationship with Angelo, a man who was “as herself / Of an impoverished house” (512-3). For eighteen-year-old Eva, whose loss of identity is initiated by her renaming as Sister Annunciata, the convent was “a home / For stunting dull despair shut from the sun” (103-4). Continuing with this line of nature imagery, she characterizes herself as:

[T]he poor plant brought from the fresh air
And natural dewings of the skyward soil,
Where its wild growth took bent at the wind’s will,
To learn indoors an artificial bloom
Or die. (139-43)

With this stunningly evocative passage, Webster articulates the plight of the Victorian wife. Representative of the nineteenth-century woman, subject to and restricted by Victorian strictures of respectability and marriageability, Annunciata was uprooted from her natural environment and forced to adapt or perish in a new one, to “learn...an artificial bloom / Or die.” Out of necessity, she complies with familial and societal pressures to

⁷ Annunciata explains that there were “too many daughters in our home” (497) and “[t]oo scanty portioning” (497); it was determined that “[a]t least one dower might be saved, one girl /Must choose the cloister” (506-7).

“be another self” (199), although she acknowledges (with a detectable air of gratification and longing) that a part of her old self remains: “Beneath the ashes of their former selves / Lie a dead part of me, but still a part, / Oh evermore a part” (215-7).

Annunciata’s new “self” is cultivated and sustained through the espousal of two survival modes: suppression of desire and expression of feigned contentment. She prides herself on being the nun of the sisterhood “nearest saintly practice” (65), a status secured by her efficacy at “crucifying most / The carnal nature” (66-7). However, her word choice betrays her charade of pride and contentment; “crucifying” suggests a forced and unjust sacrifice rather than a fervent aspiration. Suffering is once again touted as an inextricable condition of success when she declares, “My feet are on the road, and, let them bleed / Among the thorns, I still press on” (83-4).⁸ Annunciata actively works to convince others—and, more importantly, herself—that she has transcended the temptations of earthly desire. I stress *convince* because her excessive use of the word “doubtless” (three times within a 25-line span) signals how contrived her assertions are. One example is, “Doubtless, I shall be freer from the self / I have yet to guard, my victory will be won / And I shall tread on sin, invulnerable, / As the Saints do at last” (75-8). She even overcompensates for her own doubts and struggles by meditating on the deficiencies in others, boasting that she will “tread on” until the other sisters “point to me / With pride for the convent and some envy too / For themselves left lower in the race” (67-9).

⁸ Similar to Annunciata, the speaker of “Happiest Girl” claims, as part of her self-conditioning, that suffering is a necessary component of her path to “happiness.” Once again, Webster includes imagery of thorns, evocative of Christ’s crown of thorns. In stanzas 21 and 22, the speaker chides herself for thinking that “the good days always must be good” (209). She admits that she is “wise enough to know...in every promised land some thorn plants grow, some tangling weeds as well as laden vines” (212-5). She comforts herself with the hope that “thorns bear oftentimes sweet fruits” (219).

At this point in the monologue, we experience a repeated dynamic of invocation and suppression, a vicious cycle whereby Sister Annunciata “invit[es] and resist[s]” (Sutphin, *Augusta* 16) memories of her lost lover. Though she steadfastly avows that she has “trampled on” (223) her desire for earthly pleasures and “crushed its last life out” (223), she undermines this claim with her first of many remembrances of Angelo: “Nay do I fool myself? / Why do I fever so thinking of him? / ...What brought his face / So vividly before me?” (238-41). The use of “fever” as a verb insinuates that her longing is not only ignitable but, more importantly, irrepressible. The nun promptly negates these feelings: “Nay, it must not be. / Oh once my own beloved, now a mere name, / A name of something that one day was dear, / In an old world, to one who is no more” (260-4). Again, she claims that she “stand[s] as far apart as angels are / From earthly passion” (266-7), yet a few lines down, she recalls (with palpable fervor due to the sexually laden imagery) a passionate rendezvous with Angelo:

That long fond evening when we stole apart
 Out of the music and the talking,
 We stood below the orange-boughs abloom
 And the sweet night was silent, and the waves
 Were rocking softly underneath the moon,
 Asleep in the white calm, and we, alone,
 Were whispering all our hearts each into each:

.....

Wife of my soul. Are we not one, love, so? (272-86)

Annunciata soon admits, "How long that wild rapt promise hindered me / In my first struggles for the Saints' cold peace" (292-3). This is one of many instances where the word "cold" is emphasized, especially its purposefully jarring association with peace or rest. A few lines earlier, Annunciata states that her "heart has grown too cold" (227), but she thanks God for such: "[T]he Lord Himself, / I thank Him, has renewed it virgin-cold / To give to Him" (227-9). Webster emphasizes the degree to which the nun's sentiments are counter to nature.

Annunciata's amorous reminiscences send her into a swoon, the first of three she has throughout the night. Prior to this happening, she pleads, "All saints of Heaven / Pray with me, for me, pray or I am lost. / I lost! I lost! Heaven's mercy on me, lost!" (600-2). With this subtle but exquisite elision ("I am lost" to "I lost"), Webster shifts from what is present (and therefore still mutable) to what is already past, thus signaling the irreversible unraveling of Annunciata's front. When she regains consciousness, she once again reverts to familiar tactics of suppression and overcompensation. First, she determines to drown her vestigial desires with ascetic behaviors: "Can I not fast and pray, tear my scarred flesh, / Keep vigils day and night, dim my eyes / With constant weepings, stint my earthly heart / Of its most innocent food and starve it numb / With ceaseless self-denial...?" (798-803). Then, she imagines her anticipated role and authority as the next Abbess, resolving that it will be her crowning achievement to "bring the stricter laws" (861) and "to check the growth / Of such...baby prattlings and small baby joys / In the lighter-natured as we have here now" (863-6). Yet, this blatantly hypocritical plan is never actualized; Annunciata dies within months of her vigil, which is

(as will be explored later) no coincidence at all, but rather stark evidence of Webster's social critique.

Despite pleading for relief from memory ("Let the poor love-tale go! Oh never more / Let the treacherous memory stir me" [929-30]), Annunciata has two more important visions of Angelo. First, she recalls a summer day when "we two found / The boat upon the little silent lake" (1116-7) and "stole it from its place, / And let it drift into the happy shade" (1118-9) where "red roses drooped / Lush sprays" (1122-3). She speaks longingly, applying a rhetoric of spiritual ecstasy to this memory of earthly love: "Strange it is / That the brief exquisite mood of a deep bliss / Which, being lived, seemed to be some few hours, / Seems, being lost, as if a long life's whole / Had passed in it" (1193-7). Falling into another swoon, she rejoices, "Oh days adream with happiness!—adream— / Adream—I am with you—Ah yes—adream / I am with you" (1200-2). Unfortunately, this third fit of delirium delivers a traumatizing vision of herself, standing alone and helpless on the shore, witnessing Angelo's "white anguished face / Uplifting from the waters as they heaved / About him sinking!" (1294-6).

Annunciata comforts herself with the thought that this is but a dream, that Angelo is safe from harm with his bride Giulia, but what remains distressing is how she says it and how Webster arranges her words on the page:

He is with Giulia happy. I — —

Am here

Vowed to the convent, vowed to Heaven's service

And happy in the faith of Heaven's reward. (1298-301)

The dashes after “I” and the spacing before the words “Am here” create a loaded pause that lifts, for a brief but brilliant moment, *this* bride’s veil of false contentment. Contrary to what she says, she is not content with her life of self-renunciation or the promise of Heaven’s reward. Thinking once again of the “white anguished face,” she says, “I fear me many days / Will find it haunting me” (1307-8). She senses that the memories of her former life and self will persist—that, try as she might, she cannot steamroll over these longings. She hears the chapel bell ringing, ending her vigil, and tries once more to feign peace and contentment: “Now comes / The rest of prayer; and so the day begins...It will pass, / This querulous weakness with my weariness-- / It has passed; I am strong; I am myself” (1314-9). However, her last words to us negate any sense of serenity or inner resolution: “But yet I would I had not seen that face” (1324).

Serenity and inner resolution are equally lacking in Webster’s deceptively titled poem “The Happiest Girl in the World.” It does not take long, however, to see past the “disarmingly simple speech of a naive young girl” (Rigg, “Social Politics” 90) and discern how the monologue “stages...the speaker’s *awareness* that the construction of herself as wife is at odds with an inner self who resists this construction” (90). At first, one might be inclined to perceive innocence and surety in the speaker’s declaration that “all my life is morrow to my love” (5). This is no doubt encouraged by her subsequent exclamations, “Oh fortunate morrow! Oh sweet happy love!” (6). However, we are given definite reason to pause when the bride-to-be says that she will “think of him and tell myself / what to be his means, now that I am his” (9-10). The indisputably awkward syntax suggests that her sentiments are contrived as opposed to instinctual. Even if we

could disregard this phrasing, as well as the phrasing “now that I am his” (which exudes implications of patriarchal ownership), we cannot dismiss the disconcerting statement that ends stanza two: “and make myself believe it all is true” (12). Why does the speaker have to *make herself believe*? The speaker has let slip her first confession of forced complacency, exposing the contrived and performative nature of her love. If we return to her statement “all my life is morrow to my love,” we can properly detect the tone of renunciation and loss at an impending transfer of ownership (rather than, as Hickok suggests, “youthful joy and optimism” at the prospect of marital unity).

The tone proceeds to worsen in stanza three as the speaker insinuates further hesitations and unsettled/-ing feelings:

A week ago; and it seems like a life,
and I have not yet learned to know myself:
I am so other than I was, so strange,
grown younger and grown older all in one;
and I am not so sad and not so gay;
and I think nothing, only hear him think. (13-18)

One week seems like a lifetime, and yet, paradoxically, she feels that she has “yet learned to know [herself].” This, combined with her lack of a name, confirms that her identity and sense of self are already being compromised by her impending vocation. Her descriptions of feeling “so strange” and “so other than I was,” akin to Annunciata’s feelings of being “an alien in a hopeless world,” reflect a similar state of loss and alienation. Exacerbating this characterization is her sense of emotional void, being “not

so sad and not so gay.”⁹ Most disconcerting is her confession that she “think[s] nothing” but only hears “him think.” Implicit in this declaration is that she will not only think his thoughts—more importantly, she will abide by his thoughts.

During her time of introspection, the speaker admits that her betrothal is built upon prescribed standards and ideals, and she is the well-trained executor of such contrivances. According to her fiancé, his love was spurred on during a visit to her home, when he (not so accidentally) glimpsed her walking along a path at sunset. The light flickering “over [her] yellow hair and soft pale dress” (60) and “flitting across [her] as [she] flitted through” (61) convinced him. Not only does this expose the superficiality of his love, but it also reveals the performative nature of the speaker’s actions. She admits that she “knew that he would watch” (68) and that “he’d note it all and care for it” (74). When she spotted him in the distance, she “advanced demurely” (70), knowing that “the sunlight touched [her] hair and cheek” (73) and that the dress she carefully selected and donned would “[take] the light and shadow tenderly” (72). She chides herself in stanza 10 for being complicit with this charade: “Oh vain and idle poor girl’s heart of mine, / Content with that coquettish mean content!” (75-6).¹⁰ Yet her complicity is the very reason we are driven to sympathize with the speaker, for she is only doing what she “know[s] by books” (147).¹¹

⁹ Annunciata laments a similarly sterile emotionality in her sister Leonora, who is trapped in her own mercenary marriage: “I would I knew her happy now! She says / She is most happy: but she says she knows / Nothing worth sorrow” (1257-9). Though Annunciata participates in her own charade of feigned contentment, she wishes (quite pitifully) that she could indulge in passionate feeling of any sort, even in an iteration of deep sorrow: “Oh to be left my sorrow for a while, / Only a little while! to weep at will! / Oh let me weep a while if but for shame / Because I cannot check the foolish passion” (1272-5).

¹⁰ Webster engages in more delightful word play, this time to hint that the mean and coquettish “content” of her performance will furnish empty results, i.e. lack of contentment.

¹¹ Armstrong concurs: “To Webster’s credit...the poem’s irony does not prevent an understanding of the pathos of the speaker’s situation” (374).

To further emphasize that our “happiest girl” is a victim of societal convention, Webster provides two troubling analogies. Considering whether “love is not love” (106), the speaker questions, “And oh, if love be fire, what love is mine / that is but like the pale subservient moon / who only asks to be earth’s minister?” (134-6). She is the “pale subservient moon,” whose only expectation in life is to “minister” to the earth’s, i.e. her fiancé’s, wants and needs. In the previous stanza, she reflects, “He waited as you wait the reddening fruit / which helplessly is ripening on the tree, / and not because it tries or longs or wills, / only because the sun will shine on it: / but he who waited was himself that sun” (100-5). In this scenario, the fiancé is once again the power source, the sun, and she is the “reddening fruit,” ripening on the tree of marketability, waiting “helplessly” to be plucked.

Like Annunciata, the speaker of “Happiest Girl” is “hedged about with Victorian gender conventions regarding sexuality” (Sutphin, *Augusta* 18). She attempts to suppress sexual desires that threaten her prescribed role as the demure, chaste, and eternally devoted wife; however, her reminiscences betray her forced charade of innocence and naiveté. For example, as she attempts to pinpoint the exact moment when she realized her “love” for her fiancé, she reminisces about other men instead. On the day that they met, she “more gladly danced with some one else / who waltzed more smoothly and was merrier” (30-1). She also divulges that, on the day that he paid her a visit, she “more gladly talked with some one else / whose words were readier and who sought me more” (33-4). In concluding that “this love which I call love, is less than love” (113), the speaker laments:

Where are the fires and fevers and the pangs?

where is the anguish of too much delight,
 and the delirious madness at a kiss,
 the flushing and the paling at a look,
 and passionate ecstasy of meeting hands? (114-8)

We have seen similar sentiments expressed in “Sister Annunciata”; our “happiest girl” wishes that she could feel “fevers” of passion for her fiancé—the way that Annunciata “fever[s]” over thoughts of Angelo.

Despite this confessed lack of satisfaction and inner peace, the speaker of “Happiest Girl” has maintained a contented mask—so well, in fact, that her fiancé says, “[Y]ou love me utterly, / no questioning, no regrettings, but at rest” (164-5). Pondering his words, she reflects, “[W]hat should I question, what should I regret, / now I have you who are my hope and rest” (168-9). Is this a reversal of feeling, a dispersal of doubts and anxieties and a realization of latent love and fulfillment? Webster’s contemporaries certainly believed so; however, the juxtaposition of this question with the following passage bids us to reject a reading of sincerity:

I am the feathery wind-wafted seed
 that flickered idly half a merry morn,
 now thrall’d into the rich life-giving earth
 to root and bud and waken into leaf
 and make it such poor sweetness as I may;
 the prisoned seed that never more shall float
 the frolic playfellow of summer winds
 and mimic the free changeful butterfly;

the prisoned seed that prisoned finds its life
 and feels its pulses stir, and grows, and grows,
 Oh love, who gathered me into yourself,
 oh love, I am at rest in you, and live. (170-81)

The seed is deposited into the “rich life-giving” earth; however, it is “thrall’d” there, which connotes enslavement.¹² The imagery is no longer ambiguous once we hear how the seed differs from the “free changeful butterfly” and the frolicking summer winds; within the span of just four lines, Webster repeats the descriptor “prisoned” three times. Not only that, but the syntax is curious in the line, “the prisoned seed that prisoned finds its life.” Webster is once again playing with word order, this time to amplify the shakiness of the speaker’s feelings. Does she mean that the prisoned seed *finds its life*, or that the seed *finds its life prisoned*? At the very minimum, we are given reason to question the speaker’s sincerity when she instructs herself to “grow, grow, and blossom out, and fill the air, / feed on his richness, grow, grow, blossom out, / and fill the air, and be enough for him” (184-6). What should disturb us, even more than the parasitic imagery of her existing only to “feed on hi[m],” is that these lines amount to a self-induced pep talk, urging her to be content, or “at rest,” with the goal of being “enough for” her husband.

This rhetoric of being “at rest” is one of the strongest connections between both monologues, and Webster’s ironic use of the sentiment in “Sister Annunciata” helps to inform and confirm a satirical reading in “Happiest Girl.” In Part II of “Sister Annunciata,” Abbess Ursula recounts details of Annunciata’s life and death as a means of

¹² In addition, the seed was brought there “to root and bud,” to produce offspring in the way that a good Victorian wife would have been expected to produce children upon marriage.

persuading a young, defiant novice to emulate her faith and devotion. However, the Abbess is unwittingly ignorant of Annunciata's struggles, and thus her "simplistic comments...only widen the incongruous distance between inner experiences and their outer interpretations" (Boos 282). As Ursula points to Annunciata's grave, she extols her as "the saintliest creature" (1374); yet, the fact that the cross on her tombstone is "a little fallen slant" (1373) reflects what we know from Annunciata herself—that her devotion as Christ's bride was not as focused and steadfast as presented (or assumed). Ursula mistakenly claims that Annunciata arrived at the convent in happiness—"of her free will" (1574)—and left the same way: "You may know / She died in happiness" (1494-5). As proof, she quotes Annunciata's dying words, which were, "Such happy rest" (1547). Annunciata *did* secure a "happy rest" in death, but not for the reason Ursula thinks or suggests. The Abbess urges the novice, "But be persuaded, at the least, of this, / That you may learn her joy in heavenly things, / And know at last even such a peace in death" (1586-8). The absolute irony is that what the Abbess calls Annunciata's "joy in heavenly things" is but a well-wrought facade, outwardly convincing and yet so spiritually agonizing and debilitating that the only relief to be had was "peace in death."

Annunciata's vigil only served to reignite rather than extinguish her desire for Angelo, and the fact that she *does* die so soon after promotes Webster's social critique—the danger and expense of "subverting natural female desire" (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 77). Our "happiest girl" is no more at rest emotionally and psychologically than Annunciata was, and the way in which Ursula misunderstands Annunciata mimics how Webster's contemporaries—and even some modern-day critics—have misread *her* character.

Like Annunciata, the “happiest girl” ultimately attempts to overcompensate for her doubts and anxieties by promising self-abnegating devotion to her wifely vocation. In stanza 20, she vows, “My love, my love, my love! And I shall be / so much to him” (195-6). Yet, the “rhetorical excess of their anaphoric repetition suggests the artifice of a cultural cathechism” (Slinn 176). In other words, by this point in the monologue, all that her contrived declaration manages to do is “enact the social expectations of the perfect bourgeois wife, dramatizing the identity of a fiancée as totally devoted to her husband’s future approval...and hence tying the cultural definition of the happiest girl in the world to subordination in marriage” (176). Patricia Rigg agrees, adding that this is key to Webster’s social critique: “[The speaker] uses the adjectival and symbolic language intrinsic to description to situate her love within the convention of the Victorian angel/wife, but cliché intrudes to undermine not only her attempts to be conventional *but the convention itself*” [emphasis added] (“Social Politics” 90). Just as Glennis Byron suggests, Webster has her speaker “inhabit the conventional in order to expose it” (88). The speaker envisions the roles she will fill for her soon-to-be husband, starting with “the friend whom he will trust” (197), “the child whom he will teach” (198), “the servant he will praise” (199), “the mistress he will love” (200), and ending with “his wife” (201). Strikingly, all of these roles are accompanied by descriptors enumerating something positive gained or earned—that is, all except “wife.” This overt omission accentuates and condemns the typically debilitating and identity-sapping nature of this role. Webster’s biting satire is indisputable by the time the speaker remarks, “and I, what happiness could I have more / than that dear labour of a happy wife?” (232-3). The only

assurance offered by this statement is this—to be a “happy wife” will certainly be a “labour.”

In the final stanza, the speaker contemplates how she will orchestrate her reunion with her fiancé. Parroting the lessons she knows from books, she states, “I will not seek him, I; / he would be vain and think I cared too much” (262-3). The awkwardly floating “I” at the end of the line, followed by a sudden shift to the third-person subject “he” at the beginning of the next, is a curious instance of self-correction; she remembers, mid-thought, that she vowed to “think nothing, only hear him think.” The last three lines read:

I will wait here, and he shall seek for me,
and I will carelessly—Oh his dear step—
he sees me, he is coming; my own love!” (264-6)

Suppressing all previously admitted doubts and desires, the speaker resolves to comply with and enact the patriarchal ideals of the passive, subservient angel-in-the-house. We witness her literally *stepping back into character* upon hearing her fiancé’s advancing footsteps, assuming a pose of deference and idleness that promises to define her performance as Victorian bride. With no knowledge of what happens next to our speaker, we are left to contemplate Webster’s sympathetic warning. Will the fate of the “happiest girl” be that of Sister Annunciata, succumbing to the “poisonous sad sweet sin of looking back” (“SA” 56)? What will be the consequences for her in “learn[ing]...an artificial bloom” (“SA” 142)?

In “Happiest Girl,” we do not observe the results of these consequences; however, just a few years after its publication, Webster abandons implicitness and instead presents

us with a blunt and explicitly sarcastic narrative of how the speaker's marriage must have looked and functioned. In "Saint Opportune," one of the essays from *A Housewife's Opinions*, the titular character is a young bride whose "career as a wife was the perfect accomplishment of the highest auguries of her youth" (Webster, *HO* 210). Opportune "was always at hand, and was never in the way" (206). She "spoke little of her own accord" (206), though when spoken to, she "was ever ready with an apt and modest reply" (206). As Webster wryly elaborates:

No matter at what moment of unpunctuality her husband came in bent upon his dinner, whether a quarter of an hour before time or three-quarters of an hour behind, the soup was steaming ready in the tureen, the...fried fish at the evanescent perfect phase of crispness, the joint done to a turn as he liked it...If he was inclined for conversation, her ready ears were glad...if he displayed learning, she was proud of it and only wished she had been better gifted to understand; if he displayed ignorance, she never discovered it and was yet the prouder. (210)

Opportune's every thought is "that which he said yesterday or would say to-morrow" (211), a sentiment echoed almost word-for-word by Webster's "happiest girl."

When Opportune begins to "show a wrinkled forehead" (211)—her husband had a "dislike to excess of maturity in women and much loathed the writing of it on the face in wrinkles" (211)—she enters the convent. With acerbic wit, Webster recounts, "It was just then that St. Opportune felt...her irrepressible vocation for the convent. Her husband remonstrated; she wept and obeyed. But he saw her secret sorrow, her wasting, her pallor; he offered her her freedom. It was her truest desire, and she hailed his gift with

joy" (211). Opportune takes the veil, and her "benevolent" husband consequently marries a young girl "who was like what she had been" (211). As her story quickly winds to an end, Webster reveals that, like Sister Annunciata, Opportune "did not live long in the cloister" (212).

Though we do not witness or hear about Opportune's short tenure in the convent, the narrator does inform us of a deathbed confession. Before meeting her tragic end, Opportune revealed that she "had taken it amiss that her husband ever most praised and most served such women as were least inclined to those virtues and humilities which he approved and which, therefore, she most possessed" (211). Yet, as the narrator interjects, she did not "perceive this righteous severity" (211) in her philandering husband until "her perceiving mattered nothing to him" (211). This was to be her "only, yet much and needfully lamented, shortcoming" (211).

The irony of "Saint Opportune" is unmistakable, and Webster's sarcasm is scathing. Opportune is not just a fictional descendant of Sister Annunciata and "happiest girl." She is, more impressively, a skillful fusion of the two, a victim who suffers both physical and mental confinement and pays the ultimate price—the loss of her life—due to her attempts to meet and exceed Victorian ideals of the angel-wife. What Webster makes patently clear via the narrator's commentary is that Opportune's circumstances as a Victorian wife are to be "much and needfully lamented" (211) and her "innocence...the more clearly known" (211). The same consideration and verdict is warranted of her two earlier monologists.

Lady Boycott, the Not-So-Merry Wife *or* Widow

“The Happiest Girl in the World” and “Sister Annunciata” are not Webster’s only fictional critiques of Victorian wifedom and marriage. In fact, far more blatant, brazen, and rhetorically potent in its presentation and critique is another lesser-known and undervalued work in Webster’s oeuvre, a closet drama titled *A Woman Sold*. The trials and disappointments of Eleanor Vaughan, a “young thing / In the bud of stainless girlhood” (I. 19-20) steered into a monetarily advantageous but loveless marriage, are disclosed and deliberated over the course of two acts. Act I features a heated dialogue between Eleanor and Lionel, her young, passionate, yet poor suitor, concerning the mercenary motivations behind her sudden engagement to Sir Joyce Boycott. Act II, taking place a few years later, features a private conversation between Eleanor, now the widowed Lady Boycott, and her friend Mary, in which she: (1) divulges the falseness and tedium of her wifely performance and (2) indulges in thoughts of reigniting the amorous affections of her former suitor. The problem is that, unbeknownst to Eleanor, Mary is happily engaged to the now wealthy and established Lionel. Eleanor’s story is one of suppressed desire and feigned contentment twice over—first, when she succumbs to familial and societal pressures to marry Sir Joyce in Act I, and then again in Act II, when she conspires to squash her still-extant feelings for Lionel (and conceal their prior association) in order to maintain a sororal relationship with Mary. Albert Pionke is right to assert that *A Woman Sold* offers Webster’s “most complex, successful, and implicitly political resolution to this same problematic” of “abrogated, or ‘fallen’ agency” (466). One of the key contributors to this complexity and success is again the choice of genre.

Closet drama, as defined by Susan Brown, is “drama that, either by intention or default, finds its performance in the minds of readers within their ‘closets’ or private rooms” (89). Webster’s decision to write *A Woman Sold* as a closet drama rather than a monologue invites some inquiry from contemporary readers. One reason is that twentieth and twenty-first century audiences have had less exposure to the genre and therefore less understanding and appreciation of its advantages and appeal. Despite its popularity with the Romantics and even the Victorians, by the time Webster died in 1894, the genre was falling out of fashion with readers. (In fact, Christine Sutphin stipulates this as one of the reasons Webster may have disappeared from the cultural radar: “Moreover, the genre she turned to in the later years of her career—the closet or verse drama—was not widely read in the twentieth century” [*Augusta* 34].) In addition, *A Woman Sold* was released in 1867 during the four-year period of her career (1866-1870) that Webster wrote and published dramatic monologues, and it is for these monologues that Webster received much critical praise¹³ and her only stint of commercial success.¹⁴ Therefore, to have privileged the closet drama form may appear to be an unnecessary or risky choice.

Yet, Webster’s decision is quite logical and smart given her *modus operandi* as a writer and her burgeoning presence and objectives as a women’s rights activist. On the most basic level, generic experimentation was endemic to Webster’s career; she had a penchant for trying out different forms, including an early attempt at a novel (*Lesley’s*

¹³ In addition to laudatory comparisons of Webster’s monologues to those of Robert Browning, it was stated in a review of her second (and last) collection of dramatic monologues, *Portraits*, that “Elizabeth Barrett Browning has passed away, and her mantle seems to have fallen on Mrs Webster.” (Qtd. from *Examiner and London Review*, 21 May 1870, in Christine Sutphin, ed., *Augusta Webster: Portraits and Other Poems*, Broadview Press, Ontario 2000, p. 418.)

¹⁴ Patricia Rigg notes that Webster’s use of the dramatic monologue “had made her by 1870 as [commercially] popular as she was to be” (“Lyric Muse” 137).

Guardians),¹⁵ a later turn to lyric poetry (*A Book of Rhymes*), and a final focus on the sonnet cycle (resulting in the unfinished and posthumously published work *Mother and Daughter*). This is in addition to an already impressive and varied résumé as a dramatist, essayist, literary critic, and Greek translator. On a more substantial and persuasive note, the closet drama form may have allowed Webster to be taken more seriously as a poet, as Judith Willson conjectures in her introduction to *Out of My Borrowed Books*:

Closet drama had its own qualities, drawing into poetry some of the externality of the theatre...and demanding a correspondingly alert responsiveness from readers. It was a poetic form used by George Eliot and Barrett Browning, too, enabling each to write on an ambitious scale that rejected the assumption that women's natural poetic voice was the intimate confessional lyric. Although Webster's plays themselves have long been forgotten, the qualities of drama are crucial to her poetry's claim to intellectual substance. (12-3)

Willson's point about "intellectual substance" hints at the ideas of Katherine Newey, Karen Raber, and Susan Brown, all of whom speak more extensively about the history and political dimension of the genre itself.

One of the fundamental questions posed by Katherine Newey in *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* is, "What impact did women's gender difficulties have on the content and form of their plays?" (3). In the same vein as Willson, Newey argues, "In the examples of the dramatic writing of George Eliot and Augusta Webster, we can see

¹⁵ The literary critic in Webster also made "principled" (Rigg, "Lyric Muse" 137) decisions to abandon genres that did not align with or reflect her strengths/skills as a writer. For example, she turned away from novel writing after the one attempt, self-critiquing *Lesley's Guardians* as "one of my earliest failures" (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 53).

the enduring power of poetic drama, its lure for serious and ambitious women writers” (*Women’s Theatre* 110) due to their ability to “thrash out issues of both political and aesthetic significance” (111-2). Karen Raber agrees, maintaining that the closet drama form has long been used, especially by female writers, to present “a concentrated analysis of power—social, political, economic, [and] sexual” (19). In *Dramatic Difference*, Raber explores the expansive use of the genre from the late sixteenth century through the Restoration, noting its “specifically political ends and political ramifications” (14). Of the “spate” (23) of closet dramas written during this period, an “inordinate number” (23) are written by women. As Raber argues, women of this era “specifically and consistently capitalized on the unequivocal status of closet drama” (14) for it “gave space for the analysis of dysfunction within marriage, families, and governments. Women writers could thus appropriate the genre to critique relations in each of these domains” (14).

More directly applicable to our discussion of Webster and the nineteenth century is the work of Susan Brown, author of “Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women Authors.” Brown deserves credit on two fronts, one for exploring and paying homage to the closet drama form, which is a rarity among contemporary critics, and two for offering one of the only comprehensive, full-length treatments of *A Woman Sold*. In “Determined Heroines,” Brown states:

Poetic drama of modern life by Victorian women...represents a fascinating instance of female poets exploring available literary forms for their ability to represent the complex, socially embedded issues facing contemporary women and for their ability to meet the aesthetic challenge of representing

women as determined heroines, at once heroic and socially constrained.

(105-6)

In essence, Brown claims about closet drama what Glennis Byron does about dramatic monologue—that it affords the female writer a unique opportunity to target the system (the “social contradictions of the Victorian gender system” [90]) rather than the psychology of the speaker. Similar to the dramatic monologue, the closet drama “provid[es] a showcase for [the heroine’s] subjectivity and articulat[es] [her] determined relations to social systems and structures” (101).

Form once again allows Webster to shape and deliver an overt, trenchant critique of Victorian wifehood and marriage. As with “Happiest Girl” and “Annunciata,” *A Woman Sold* conveys the detriments of wifely performativity, and Eleanor’s portrayal is similarly tailored to evoke sympathy, not judgment or contempt. Her betrothal and marriage to Sir Joyce is not the result of her own weakness or selfishness, as is suggested by Lionel, but rather the coercion of the Victorian gender system itself. What the drama offers additionally that the monologue by definition cannot is a “multiplicity of voices working together to create a dialogized representation of the issues” (Brown 102). The advantage is a “more literal representation of the forces at work in the production of gendered subjects” (102). Thus, the beauty and benefit of the closet drama is that Webster does not have to suggest “through implication and indirection” (102) that Lionel, for example, harbors the same sense of entitlement and rights of ownership (with regard to his relationship with Eleanor) that he chastises Sir Boycott for; rather, Lionel demonstrates this *for* (and about) *himself* via his dialogue with Eleanor in Act I. It also provides Webster’s protagonist, the “woman sold,” with the ability to directly confront,

oppose, and discredit the societal forces doing the repressing (as personified by Lionel) or enabling its continuation (as personified by Mary). As a result, Webster is able to “attack blatantly and without apology the inequities of Victorian patriarchy” (Rigg, “Social Politics” 88).

Act I of *A Woman Sold* opens with an accusation/presumption of guilt; Lionel accosts Eleanor with, “Then it is true!” (I. 1). The effect on the reader is both jarring—we are thrust into the middle of an indictment without any context—and lulling—we expect a conventional victim-violator dynamic, whereby the one doing the accusing is the one wronged and thus deserving of sympathy. The fact that Eleanor makes no gesture of denial or dissent does not work in her favor at first. Already aware of the rumor to which Lionel is referring, Eleanor confirms that external pressures have indeed “force[d] [her] to [her] good” (I. 10), i.e. accepting a proposal from Sir Joyce Boycott. In addition to her friends being so “fain” (I. 3) and her mother being so “pressing” (I. 4)—they will both “hear no Noes” (I. 10)—Eleanor insinuates that Sir Joyce’s wealth induced the sudden betrothal. She notes that Sir Joyce is “so good / So full of promises” (I. 4-5) that there is not a single marriageable woman “among the highest ladies round” (I. 6) who would not, at his proposal, “smile elate and all her kin / Bow low and thank him and go swelled with pride” (I. 7-8). It would appear, based on the initial set-up and first few lines of dialogue, that Lionel is the unequivocal victim. As their conversation ensues, however, we come to realize—due to the genre’s “dialogized representation of the issues”—that our sympathy should instead reside with Eleanor, as does Webster’s.

Lionel’s anger originally comes across as a by-product of his pure intentions—wanting to preserve the innocence and respectability of the woman he loves. He abhors

the thought that she, “the like / Of babies in [her] fond grave innocence” (I. 19-20), could have been “bought like any lower thing...like the horse that won / The Derby last, the picture of the year, / The best bred pointer, or the costliest ring” (I. 36-9). He rebukes the “buyer,” Sir Joyce, whom he vilifies as a “cold fool” (I. 40), a “dried up pithless soul” (I. 46), and, most alarmingly, “one who’ll own, / With a feigned yawn” (I. 43-4). However, it does not take long for a change to occur in his tone—and our perception. He is quick to chastise Eleanor’s collusion and profit in this “unholy bargain” (I. 200); she was “bought / For laces, diamonds, a conspicuous seat / In country ball-rooms, footmen, carriages, / A house in town and so on” (I. 48-51). Yet, as Lionel suggests, Sir Joyce should not dare to “haggle at the price” (I. 54), for what he acquires in the deal—Eleanor’s “girlhood, blushes, sentiment, / Grace, innocence...and such a bloom / Of an unfingered peach just newly ripe” (I. 54-9)—is far more appealing and valuable, especially since these “goods” are non-refundable.

The comparison of Eleanor to “an unfingered peach just newly ripe” should conjure up the image of our “happiest girl” being similarly characterized as “reddening fruit / which helplessly is ripening on the tree.” The perception of woman as sexual object is present in both works; however, the essential difference in *A Woman Sold* is who articulates such commentary and the resulting tone and effect of that commentary. In “Happiest Girl,” the speaker herself, a female, acknowledges and laments that she is eyed as a (sexually) ripe object, her key descriptor being “helplessly.” The power does not lie with her but rather with the male beholder. In *A Woman Sold*, Lionel is the male gazer, advancing this disturbing conception of Eleanor laden with sexual undertones of female vulnerability and subjection. Hearing this perspective from Lionel’s own mouth

(as opposed to Eleanor's where it could be construed as subjective) begins to adjust our perspective of who the true victim is in this scenario.

Lionel's "moral high ground" (Brown 98) gathers momentum with a series of pointedly suggestive comments about Eleanor's innocence and character, beginning with, "Aye, when a modest woman sells herself / Like an immodest one, she should not find / A niggard at the cheque book" (I. 60-2).¹⁶ More explicit is his subsequent musing, "How I received the tidings that Miss Vaughan / Was pricked for Lady Boycott?" (I. 94-5). The sexual connotation of this statement, specifically tied to the etymology of "pricked," bolsters the insinuation that Eleanor prostituted herself in exchange for a rich husband. What gives force to Lionel's condemnation is the presence of other male voices (belonging to those with whom he fraternizes at a men's club) in the drama that both influence and reinforce Lionel's not-so-subtle assessment of Eleanor as prostitute. By inserting these other voices, Webster establishes and illustrates Lionel's link to the broader ideological system being targeted. Quoting Pringle, one of his friends at the club, Lionel reiterates the following judgment:

'That coy Miss Eleanor, she knows her worth.

All very well to lure on you or me

With her odd ways, half peacock and half dove,

Strutting and cooing—but, for marriage, why

We come to business then. She's a shrewd girl.' (I. 112-6)

Lionel's ease and willingness to repeat such a denigrating appraisal, to Eleanor herself no less, demonstrates two things: (1) that he obviously concurs and (2) that he has

¹⁶ Webster memorably uses the phrase "a modest woman" in her dramatic monologue "A Castaway" when Eulalie, the prostitute, ironically—and, more important to our discussion, sympathetically—refers to herself as such.

undoubtedly been shaped by and is aligned with patriarchal ideology and the mercenary principles he claims to oppose.

What should be considered at this point is how Webster's title for the drama, *A Woman Sold*, conflicts with the charge levied against Eleanor. Feminists such as Webster did consider mercenary marriages "of a piece with prostitution" (Brown 98); however, they also viewed them as "a vicious consequence of women's economic disabilities and stressed the collusion of bourgeois mores with such practices" (98). In an essay from *A Housewife's Opinions* titled "The Dearth of Husbands," Webster assigns culpability directly to a rigged economic system: "But the ability to earn her livelihood at need might save a girl from ruining her self-respect and her happiness by a mercenary marriage" (HO 245). Thus, the customary Victorian critique of mercenary marriage is complicated by Webster's portrayal of a woman who cannot afford, both literally and figuratively, to be more discriminating or self-determining. While Lionel and his male acquaintances, the very determiners and upholders of bourgeois mores, suggest that Eleanor has done something to herself, the passive construction of Webster's title irrefutably indicates that Eleanor has had something done to her.

Yet, how do we reconcile this with moments in the dialogue when Eleanor ascribes blame to herself? For example, she assures Lionel at one point that he does "no ill that [she] can chide" (I. 78) and that she must "bear in patience now if [he] give[s] blame / Perhaps a little harder than he know[s]" (I. 82-3). These instances, though seemingly incriminating, actually reinforce Eleanor's deservedness of our sympathy, not judgment or contempt; they demonstrate that her abandonment of Lionel for Sir Joyce's proposal was not the result of heartlessness, selfishness, or deep-felt longing. Nowhere is

this more evident than when Lionel evokes memories of their romance. Recalling the words of Sister Annunciata, Eleanor implores Lionel to stop reminiscing, lamenting, "There are things one must forget" (I. 173). She continues, "But ah! it is so hard. / One must be happier than I can be / To be able to forget past happiness" (I. 174-6). She does not tout or bask in the vision of her new life as Lady Boycott; rather, she mourns the death of her former self:

But, Lionel, what you call yesterday
 Seems to me parted from my present self
 By a whole other life lived in the dark,
 I know not when. Ah! surely yesterday
 Is long ago when all its hopes are dead,
 And Eleanor is dead who lived in it
 And loved you. (I. 177-83)

Even when she deflects blame onto herself, we can discern how Eleanor is but a product of a much larger and contemptible system of inequity, one that turns matrimony into a means of livelihood.¹⁷ The sympathy commanded by Webster for Eulalie, the middle-class courtesan in "A Castaway" is similar to the sympathy commanded for Eleanor in *A Woman Sold*; both women need to "conform to actual social conditions in order to survive even while recognizing their artificial, contestable status" (Slinn 181). Eleanor's pitiableness lies in her very acknowledgment of—and shame expressed for—her complicity.

¹⁷ "Marriage as a Means of Livelihood" is in fact the title and thematic focus of one of the essays in *A Housewife's Opinions*.

Lionel proceeds to make appeals to Eleanor that amount more to veiled criticisms and assertions of superiority than (as Albert Pionke describes them) “affective assertions” (477). Wanting her to rescind her acceptance of Sir Joyce’s proposal, Lionel asks, “Can I not *taunt* you even to a no?” (I. 63). He urges her to “[b]e proud again, my love” (I. 90); however, his words of “encouragement” are sinisterly entangled with Victorian conceptions of women and illness: “How you are changed— / What is it? Are you ill? You were so proud” (I. 84-5). He proposes that she blame her change of mind on his rhetorical cleverness and her own simple mindedness: “Say I, like a rough lawyer, questioned you / Into a maze, and twisted me a yes / Out of your shifting coil of noes, while you / Were dimly pondering what I asked” (I. 69-72). He presses her to “defend [her]self” (I. 64) and to “[s]peak, speak; / Say anything” (I. 72-3), insisting that he does not want her to “droop and give / Like a rock-rooted seaweed in the surf (I. 74-5). Yet, it is Lionel who, both before and after these assertions, dominates the conversation, speaking roughly 80% of the total amount of lines in Act I (249 out of 321).¹⁸ This is, in fact, one of the benefits of the genre itself and the beauty of this drama in particular—Lionel speaks for himself. Thus, Webster does not have to establish “through implication and indirection” (Brown 102) that he does not deem Eleanor an equal participant in this discussion or, more grievously, their relationship. Rather, Lionel reveals this all by himself via his own words—and the sheer volume of them.

Toward the end of Act I, Lionel reaches out to grab Eleanor’s hand, causing Eleanor to envision and conscribe herself to a future of wifely performativity. The ring

¹⁸ The disparity is staggering, both visually and analytically. The ratios of lines in Lionel’s three longest speeches to lines in Eleanor’s responses are as follows: 69:6, 63:2, and 81:17. (To be fair, the 81 lines are comprised of a 33-line speech and a 48-line speech broken up by a single line of interjection by Eleanor.) Eleanor’s 17-line response is the longest she is granted in Act I.

on her finger acts as a conduit for the divulgence of uncensored truth. Eleanor says to Lionel, “You hold my hand; / Look what you hold with it—it hurts me now / In your tight grasp, and it has hurt ere now / With another kind of pain” (I. 191-4). She admits that Sir Joyce’s offering is the source of both physical pain—the result of Lionel’s hand squeezing it in hers, his “tight grasp” yet another (metaphorical) red flag—and emotional pain (for its placement dictated that she relinquish her former self). Nevertheless, with her next breath, she utters, “I shall grow used to it” (I. 195). When asked candidly if she loves Sir Joyce, she can only ventriloquize a seemingly well-rehearsed dictum: “A good wife always gives her love / To a kind husband” (I. 202-3). What we perceive here—and intentionally so—is resignation, not affirmation. She vows that she will not “fall short of [her] duty as a wife” (I. 207) and that Sir Joyce “will have his due from me” (I. 208). Yet, in a very telling passage, she cannot even bring herself to refer to Sir Joyce as her husband. Still referring to the ring, Eleanor disconcertingly comments:

It means, you know,
My fetter to the hus—to him, Sir Joyce,
Who will be soon—I supposed I am his now,
Marked by his ring. (I. 195-8)

She refers to the ring as “my fetter,” a descriptor that implies (as it did in “Annunciata”) that a woman’s purportedly advantageous marital arrangement is in fact akin to enslavement. She proves that she has internalized the patriarchal discourse of ownership by stating that she is “his now.” Finally, Eleanor concludes that she is “marked by his ring,” which complements both the animal—and slave—imagery from before in suggesting that she has been “branded” with tangible proof of ownership. Through the

imagery and word choice of these four lines alone, Webster garners much success in redirecting judgment onto the pervasive network of patriarchal control and eliciting sympathy for her protagonist.

Eleanor's candid admission of performativity elicits more vicious denunciation from Lionel, building up to the disclosure of his hypocrisy and the "limits of [his] ideological strait-jack[e]" (Flint 164). Relinquishing his grasp, Lionel tells Eleanor, "There, take your hand again. / It *is* his for the moment. It was mine / By a less unholy bargain" (I. 198-200). As if his brusqueness, possessiveness, and latent competitiveness were not damaging enough, he also engages in the very same discourse of matrimonial bargaining for which he chided Sir Joyce previously. He rebukes her complicity, snidely commenting, "Wife's duty, yes, you'll never shame that, child; / You'll make this sin of yours shine out at last / Like virtue by your married perfectness" (I. 211-3). He may be prophetic in doubting that she "can learn now / To cheat [her] heart with such a dull content, / And be at rest and bask" (I. 232-34).¹⁹ He may also be right in his assessment that, like the proverbial bird in a gilded cage, she will either "tear and break [her] useless wings / With beating at the bars" (II. 236-7) or else "mope / In obstinate tired stillness" (II. 237-8). Yet, what he is sorely wrong about is that Eleanor's choice of husband and her future hardships are directly correlated to her own flaws. He scolds, "I am the man / Who trusted you, set all his hopes on you, / Because he had your promise, loved you past / All thought of treachery from you" (I. 265-8). This statement, yet another one of Lionel's so-called "affective assertions," is especially disconcerting for it perpetuates the

¹⁹ The echoes of "Sister Annunciata" and "Happiest Girl" (references to the female protagonist being neither "content" nor "at rest") are resounding.

belief that man must be ever vigilant against woman's naturally duplicitous intentions and capabilities.

Although Lionel has presented himself as above the mercenary principles of the Boycotts' marriage, he espouses the same principles of commoditization and ownership and, by his own words and actions, proves his blameworthy collusion with a debilitating gender system. Within the final 50 lines of Act I, Lionel supplants Sir Joyce in the roles of tempter and consumer. He coaxes, "Yes, press your dear arms / Still round my neck, close, so. My Eleanor, / You are my own again" (I. 271-3). He offers her "a simple home where things are smoothed / By love more than by spending, for a life / Where little cares go plodding hand in hand / With little pleasures" (II. 290-3). Yet, as Susan Brown astutely notes, his "economically saturated discourse" (99) betrays and undermines his offering; Lionel "employs the same discourse of mercantile transaction" (98) that warranted his censure of Sir Joyce earlier. Act I ends with Lionel asking Eleanor to wait for him, promising to return in a few months' time (after he has made a name for himself professionally) to fulfill his goal of "claiming [her], the promised prize" (I. 306). His parting words epitomize his objectification: "Sir Joyce can never buy my wife away" (I. 320). This declaration, the penultimate line of Act I, is positioned perfectly for maximum impact and reverberation. Lionel's motivations are inextricably linked to Victorian bourgeois mores, whereby a proposal of marriage is considered a mercantile transaction, one muddled by issues of ownership and market competition. Though the brazenness of this declaration is shocking, we should have been prepared for it a few lines earlier when, in speaking about his professional standing, he says he is "greedy now to heap up gains" (I. 314). It seems that Sir Joyce is not the only one to offer a "paradise" that is more

vener than depth; Lionel's persuasive appeals and vilification of Eleanor are ultimately attempts to remedy his own humiliation and "heap up" another "gain."

Within the six-year time lapse between Acts I and II of *A Woman Sold*, there is a surprising yet thematically edifying reversal of events. At the end of Act I, Lionel's persuasions have convinced Eleanor to break her engagement to Sir Joyce. Eleanor promises to wait for Lionel to establish himself professionally; she tells him, "I know / I could be happier so—with *you*—I know, / Than in the tempting paradise Sir Joyce / Has won my parents with—and almost me" (I. 293-6). When Lionel leaves boasting, "Sir Joyce can never buy my wife away" (I. 320), Eleanor responds with this, the closing line of Act I: "Oh never, never. Love, I *will* be strong" (I. 321). However, the very title of Act II, "Lady Boycott," informs us that what is much stronger than Eleanor's will is the strength and coerciveness of the Victorian marriage system itself. By clever design, Webster compels us to once again acknowledge and ponder Eleanor's lament at the very beginning of *A Woman Sold*: "You cannot wonder that my friends declare / They'll hear no Noes, but force me to my good" (I. 9-10).

When we are reacquainted with Eleanor, now the newly widowed Lady Boycott, she is welcoming into her home one of the bridesmaids from her wedding, a friend from the "old idle days" (II. 335), Mary. Passage of time becomes the immediate topic of discussion as Eleanor laments how a mere six years of marriage has left her feeling "always tired" (II. 321). When Mary does not seem to grasp the subtext (or the gravity) of her friend's complaint, Eleanor clarifies: "[A] girl's time goes / Like music played for dancing; but a wife's— / Ah Mary married women soon grow old" (II. 347-9). In reaction to Eleanor's claim, Mary postulates, "Love is itself a youth; they should be

young / Until their husbands die" (II. 350-1). Due to choice of genre once again, Webster is able to introduce a voice whom her protagonist may challenge and even oppose, thus enabling potent social critique. Lionel was the mouthpiece of the bourgeois patriarchy in Act I, and Mary is to be the purveyor of a "gendered discourse of social regulation" (Brown 99) in Act II. She acts to uphold the patriarchal principles of compliance and complacency, deferring to platitudes of contentment without even considering her audience—in this case, a woman whose husband *has* just died and therefore, by her own logic, one who *should* be tired and worn.

Mary's attempt at defusing the situation has an adverse effect; quickly, subtle expressions of marital weariness turn into outright professions of discontent and disdain as Eleanor metaphorically "lifts the veil." Abandoning social niceties and gendered codes of conduct, Eleanor assures her friend, "Mary, you need not play now at belief / That the happiness of wifely love was mine" (II. 355-6). Even more bluntly, she confirms, "Mary, you know I never loved Sir Joyce" (II. 362). Taken aback by Lady Boycott's candor (but not the divulgence itself), Mary counsels, "Oh Eleanor! I feared it. But indeed / I think you should not say it—even now" (II. 360-1). Eleanor pleads, however, for the liberty to speak, something she was conspicuously denied by Lionel in Act I: "Oh let me say it, friend, sweet secret friend...Let me speak but to you, I who have smiled / A cheating silence for so many years" (II. 365-9).

Stripped of all pretenses, Eleanor begins to detail the psychological strain and emotional hazards of a mercenary marriage. As she does so, she proceeds to treat Mary with equal parts supplication and scorn. Though she clearly craves compassion from her

friend, Eleanor also makes a point of emphasizing how much Mary does not know—or, as already hinted, refuses to acknowledge—about her situation:

You do not know the penance to be good
 And pretty mannered dull day by dull day,
 Lapping one's heart in comfortable sloth
 Lest it should fever for its work, its food,
 Of free bold loving. (II. 370-4)²⁰

Mercenary marriage is presented by Eleanor as counter to nature itself in that it deprives the heart of its sustenance and livelihood ("free bold loving"). She continues to dwell on Mary's ignorance as she pits society's determination of what is "right" (in this case, her acceptance of Sir Joyce's proposal) against the morality of the heart:

No, you cannot dream
 How one may suffer just by doing right
 When in one's heart one knows how under right,
 For base of it, there lies a stifled wrong
 Which is not dead. (II. 374-8)

Just as Annunciata was plagued by irrepressible reveries of Angelo, Eleanor concedes, "[Y]ou cannot kill old happiness...And you remember in your heavy heart / The sweetness of delicious unwise days" (II. 383-6). Mary offers to let Eleanor "[w]eep, dear, weep, / If you are sad, and bid me comfort you" (II. 391-2)—that is, if those tears stem from a widow's grief. Otherwise, she advises against open displays of discontent,

²⁰ It is no coincidence that Webster has used "fever" (as a verb) in this context for now a third time—once in "Annunciata" to describe the nun's irrepressible feelings for Angelo; once in "Happiest Girl" to express the speaker's lack of passion for her fiancé; and now in *A Woman Sold* to illustrate Eleanor's suppressed desire and feigned contentment as Lady Boycott.

warning that it is “bitter acting, dear, when grief puts on / A show of laughters and makes mirth by scoffs” (II. 394-5). Eleanor corrects her, stating that the “bitter acting” has been happening all along, up until this very moment, but the time has come now for a release: “I have burst / My serious due disguise of widowhood. / I am bold with my sorrow” (II. 403-5).

In conjunction with targeting patriarchy, Webster criticizes the superficiality and/or complete lack of sororal support experienced by Eleanor, our representative Victorian wife. Webster’s use of the closet drama allows for Eleanor’s complaints and expressions of hurt to be more than just private (and therefore seemingly isolated and localized) ruminations. Given the opportunity to call out Mary to her face, Eleanor swaps subtleties for outright ridicule. Sarcastically questioning whether she should “talk shadows” (II. 406) to one who knows “the shape of truth behind them” (II. 406), Eleanor alleges, “You read my secret, Mary, years ago” (II. 408). She chides Mary for her “silent tenderness” (II. 413) and “talk / Of making duty dear by loving it / For God’s sake, if not man’s” (II. 413-5).²¹ With a potent combination of sweetness and sarcasm, she digs in, “[Y]ou knew the while, / I saw it, you kind prudent hypocrite!” (II. 415-6).

Webster then casts her net wider, critiquing how Eleanor’s performativity is matched by bourgeois society’s own performativity. Mary serves as the representative of society-at-large, which knowingly ignores or closes its eyes to the plight of Victorian wives pressured into mercenary marriages. Eleanor claims that Mary, too, has performed well, with her “show of taking [Eleanor] at what / [She] should have been” (II. 409-10)—

²¹ This confrontation between Eleanor and Mary makes me wish that Webster could have rewritten “Sister Annunciata” as a closet drama (after experimenting with the genre for *A Woman Sold*). As it stands, “Sister Annunciata” is two separate monologues, one by Annunciata and one by Abbess Ursula, combined into one work. It would have been fascinating to see Annunciata have the chance, as Eleanor does, to confront and inform the woman who so clearly misunderstands and grossly misrepresents her fellow sister.

an “easy-minded wife / Who loved her lord in quiet and was pleased / To have her comforts with him...or without” (II. 410-2). The ellipses set apart and accentuate the crucial afterthought—comfort was not what Eleanor found at all. Shockingly, Eleanor claims that she, a respectable middle-class wife, was even “wearier than the worn drudge” (II. 417) who “toils past woman’s strength the hard day through / And cowers at evening to the drunken boor / Who strikes her with a curse because she’s his / And that’s his right upon her (II. 418-21). To clarify and substantiate the validity of this severe comparison, Webster has Eleanor disclose that the “price [she] earned” (II. 424) for her weariness and labor—for “lov[ing] against / The longings and loathings of [her] heart” (II. 422-3)—was “only smiles / And too familiar fondlings” (II. 424-5). She concludes with a chillingly suggestive aside: “Ah, he had / His rights upon me” (II. 425-6).

Through Eleanor’s confession, Webster exposes and condemns the too-common sexual power dynamic resulting from mercenary marriages and the consequences of Victorian husbands maintaining full legal—which then translates into physical—rights within the marriage. Sir Joyce’s “smile / And condescending husbandly caress” (II. 457-8) serve as implicit evidence of her submission. Psychologically affecting, Eleanor says that Sir Joyce “made [her] feel so abject and so false / When he approved [her] so!” (II. 459-60).

Even brief moments when Eleanor tries not to be entirely dismissive of Sir Joyce attest to her victimization. She does say that he “meant [her] well” (II. 426), that he “was not often hard to me” (II. 427); that he “gave / With an unstinting hand for all my whims” (II. 427-8); and that he “tricked me with the costliest fineries” (II. 429). It is clear, however, the double meaning intended by Webster with the phrase “tricked me;” Sir Joyce capitalized on her status as a young, unmarried, middle-class woman—thus, her

economic vulnerability—and the realities of a mercenary marriage did not amount to the “tempting paradise” offered. When Eleanor asks the rhetorical question, “What could he do more?” (II. 433), we can readily discern Webster’s sarcasm and scorn.

The course of the conversation changes as Eleanor, her anger and sorrow now vocalized and temporarily abated, envisions the prospect of a renewed romance with Lionel. Not sure that these feelings were even still accessible to her, she offers an affecting description of her suppressed desire: “I thought my heart at least / Had numbed to an unsinning deadness. Yes, / I did in truth believe I had full learned / The difficult strange lesson to forget, / Because I would not, could not think of *him*” (II. 465-8). Now that she is a widow, however, she senses that a “new life [has] come / And joined on to the old that was before” (II. 489-90) her marriage to Sir Joyce. Referring to Lionel, she says, “There is a man I know whose whisper was / To me all promise of the future days, / All sweetness of the present...my one love” (II. 498-505). Eleanor does not expect Mary to understand; she says, quite naively and ironically as it turns out, “[Y]ou do not know him I *did* love; / You do not know all that there was to miss. / I cannot make you feel that for me” (II. 448-50). Still, she seeks out a sororal connection and support, pleading:

Oh! Mary, darling, comfort, comfort me.

Yes, hold me to you, let my head lie so.

Yes, soothe me, love me, darling—Oh my friend

I need another love than yours, *his* love.

I want it, want it. (II. 506-10)

Clearly, her desires are not being suppressed anymore. Yet, Eleanor does not overlook or dismiss the reality of her situation. Figuratively, Eleanor acknowledges that what once

was can never be again. She compares it to being rudely awoken from a pleasant dream: "[T]ry your most, / You cannot dream again that selfsame dream. / 'Tis over, gone" (II. 643-5). On a more practical level, Eleanor suspects that Lionel's pride would intercede; she fears, "He would never take me with my clog of lands, / Houses, and shares, and so forth, which are mine / Because I was another man's. He's proud, / He will not be beholden to Sir Joyce" (II. 741-4). Lastly, and ironically full-circle, Eleanor is privy to an engagement rumor, confessing, "I heard a while ago / That he was new betrothed" (II. 758-9).

Wishing a moment's respite, Eleanor asks Mary to change the topic to something more pleasant, a request that will drastically alter her plans for rekindled romance. Mary offers to "preach a little hope / Out of [her] simple life" (II. 764-5), and Eleanor is surprised by the subsequent news that her friend, whom she assumed would live her life in "solitary busy spinsterhood" (II. 794), has found a love who makes her "happy, happy!" (II. 791). Innocuously, Mary delivers what is, unbeknownst to her, the devastating blow: "Well, you'll see him presently, / You'll know how far from possible it were / For the woman who loves Lionel Ellerton / To love a little" (II. 823-6). What develops out of this revelation is a critical debate between Eleanor and Mary about the ideals of marriage, which in turn inspires an unexpected and utterly intriguing denouement to Webster's drama. First, though, we need to look at how Eleanor reacts to Mary's news and how it leads to a second wave of suppressed desire and feigned contentment—only this time decidedly self-imposed.

Upon learning of Mary's betrothal to Lionel, Eleanor presents a facade of happiness and approval. She proclaims, "Dear, I am glad he loves you. It is good / To

see you happy. I, whom no one loves, / Will pray you may be happy, both of you" (II. 857-9). Her first instinct, though, is to gauge the extent to which Mary knows of their past: "But, tell me, dear, he never owned the name / Of his fickle ladylove, or let you guess?" (II. 844-5). Ironically, her contrived speculations about this "fickle ladylove" serve as genuine indicators of her emotional turmoil: "[I]s she repenting all forlorn, / A woe-begone thin spinster, mourning him?...Or dead, more like—one way or other dead" (II. 846-50). It is with this last characterization that Webster means to sting, disquiet, and provoke serious reflection, for it is this disturbing fate—to be "dead, more like—one way or other dead"—that befalls all three of our Victorian brides—Sister Annunciata, "happiest girl," and now Eleanor. When Eleanor is assured of her friend's unawareness, she implores, "Mary, promise me / You'll not betray me to your Lionel" (II. 873-4). Mary assumes what Eleanor wants her to assume—that her friend wishes to keep the "indecorous" content and nature of their tête-à-tête a secret. We know the true subtext; Eleanor has resolved to suppress her still extant feelings for Lionel and keep secret their relationship for Mary's sake.

A surprise knock at the door from Lionel himself brings an abrupt end to the conversation. Interestingly, what was previously a dialogue now becomes a monologue; the closet drama concludes with Eleanor talking to herself—and to us—in private, determining that she must slip into performance mode once again. The pain induced by this self-sacrificing act is palpable and pitiable; as soon as Mary exits to greet Lionel—upon Eleanor's insistence nonetheless—Eleanor cries out, "*Her* Lionel! *Her* husband! Oh my heart, / The pain in it! *Her* lover!" (II. 885-6). Rather than risk Lionel inadvertently telling Mary "more / Than she should know" (II. 888-9), Eleanor resolves

to put on her mask, to “go to him, / Welcome him briskly, wear the cheerful face / Of pleasant meeting: he’s my friend’s betrothed, / And I must take him so” (II. 889-92).

Out of the crucible that was her marriage, there was forged a strength and self-awareness that, among other things, prevents Eleanor from lying to herself about the challenge ahead; she concedes, “’Twere easier / To ape indifference, dislike itself” (II. 892-3).

However, she will do as she has done before, faithfully and convincingly: “But I can play my part, and naturally, / And he’ll not tell her, he’ll be so at ease, / So careless of me” (II. 894-6). Only this time, her performance will be of her own volition. Act II closes with Eleanor envisioning how this charade will unfold and succeed:

Oh my rare smiling part!

My pretty cordial acting! We shall be

A genial pair of friends. We both love her,

And there’s our bond. (II. 904-7)

Webster does not allow readers to minimize or negate the hefty price to be paid for Eleanor’s decision; once again, there is a “death” to be mourned. As Eleanor walks to the door, mentally preparing herself to greet Lionel, she delivers the final and perhaps most potent lines of the closet drama:

Lionel,

I’m coming to you; I, not Eleanor:

She’s gone, she’s dead. But, as for Lady Boycott,

Perhaps you’ll like her.....she is Mary’s friend. (II. 915-8)

Thus, we end on a note of self-sacrifice, not for a male romantic hopeful but rather for another woman, a paradigm shift that in and of itself reveals a feminist agenda. This

display of respect, decency, and fidelity by one woman for another—the kind that we see Eleanor extending to Mary and the kind so sorely missing from, for instance, Eulalie’s life in Webster’s “A Castaway”—elevates and promotes the need for female solidarity and sororal support. What still needs to be accounted for, however, is how and why we arrive at this resolution. The end of *A Woman Sold* leaves us with several questions, such as how did we get from Point A—Eleanor asserting, “I need...*his* [Lionel’s] love. / I want it, want it” (II. 509-10), to Point B—Eleanor deciding that they will be “a genial pair of friends” (II. 906)? Why does Eleanor make this decision, despite the admitted grief—“Oh my heart, / The pain in it!” [II. 885-6]—it has caused and will continue to generate? One cannot attribute it simply to Lionel being unavailable because Eleanor admits to Mary, *after* confessing her still-burning desire for Lionel, that she “heard a while ago / That he was new betrothed” (II. 758-9). More intriguingly, why do we end with Eleanor, the “determined heroine,” playing, in effect, second fiddle to Mary? What is Webster trying to establish, particularly about the institution of marriage, through this unexpected—and, as some might perceive it, dissatisfying—turn of events?

There's Something about Mary: Webster's Push for Companionate Marriage

The following excerpt is from a review of *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* that appeared in the *Saturday Review* (February 9, 1867) shortly after its publication:

The idea of the Woman Sold...is old enough...But Mrs. Webster has an analytic power of sufficient originality to redeem the triteness of the subject...[S]he shows a consciousness of the pain that lies hidden in our modern social life which is highly significant...because this consciousness of social discomfort and pain is the sure forerunner, as soon as it spreads and becomes widely felt, of an impassioned and stormy effort to root out the evil sources of the pain...The tone which runs through Mrs. Webster's poetry, both in this and previous volumes, is that of endurance and resignation, but under this there is a sub-flavor of wonder and defiance, or at least of something which might speedily become defiance.²²

This critic beautifully predicts and summarizes the evolution of Webster's feminist agenda as a writer, from her conception of "Sister Annunciata," "Happiest Girl," and *A Woman Sold*, works that document the "endurance and resignation" of Victorian wives and have a "sub-flavor of...defiance," to her publication of *A Housewife's Opinions*, a collection that stands as "an impassioned and stormy effort to root out the evil sources of the pain."

"Sister Annunciata," "The Happiest Girl in the World," and *A Woman Sold* were all written and published within a prolific four-year span (1866-70), one that directly preceded (or rather ushered in) the decade of Webster's most rigorous and elevated involvement in women's rights activism. As Patricia Rigg notes, these works were

²² Transcribed in Sutphin, *Augusta Webster: Portraits and Other Poems*, pps. 410-1.

written at a time “when suffrage for women seemed inevitable to reasoning minds and tireless campaigners for the ‘Cause’” (*Julia Augusta Webster* 101), and the three collections to which they belong (*Dramatic Studies*, *Portraits*, and *A Woman Sold and Other Poems*) serve as her “foregrounding of feminist issues” (31). During the mid-to-late 1870s, while Webster worked fervently as a suffragist²³ and campaigned to serve as an elected member of the London School Board,²⁴ she also wrote copious essays for the *Examiner* on topics ranging from “middle-class life, social rituals and conventions, marriage and children, literature, and women’s issues, specifically education and suffrage” (175). What began in October 1876 as individual commentaries became, in 1879, a compilation of highly astute, witty, and often-sarcastic essays pointedly titled *A Housewife’s Opinions*. Commenting on Webster’s objectives and authorial voice in *A Housewife’s Opinions*, Katherine Newey writes:

²³ Among her notable suffragist contributions, Webster (and her husband) attended a public meeting on April 28, 1873 in anticipation of the parliamentary debate on enfranchisement reform on April 30, and she was a signing member of the first petition for women’s suffrage presented to Parliament by John Stuart Mill (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 18). She worked diligently for the Suffrage Society, especially throughout the mid-1870s, attending meetings, volunteering for subcommittees, taking minutes (at some meetings), and even chairing a meeting dedicated to her particular cause—securing the vote for women ratepayers. (Her *Examiner* essay “The Female Voter” would be turned into a well-known Suffrage Society pamphlet titled “Parliamentary Franchise for Women Rate Payers.”) She was also elected to the executive of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage, serving until 1878 (when her focus shifted to education reform initiatives). See Rigg (*Julia Augusta Webster*) and Newey (“The ‘British Matron’”) for extended discussion of her activism.

²⁴ Webster staunchly believed that women’s economic disability—and thus the likelihood of their entering into mercenary marriages—could be greatly mitigated by educational opportunities. (Essays such as “University Degrees for Women” in *A Housewife’s Opinions* impart such ideas.) Webster’s service on the London School Board was dedicated to the creation and/or improvement of such opportunities. During her two terms in office, first elected in 1879 and then re-elected in 1885, she advocated for more instructional equality; for instance, Webster called for girls to have instruction in mechanical drawing, as well as physical training. As Judith Willson comments, her service was a “more radical commitment than it may appear” (11), given that women had only been granted the municipal vote a few years earlier in 1869. Willson notes that Webster’s eagerness to seize such an opportunity—not to mention her sheer ability to secure the elected position (despite attempts by four male incumbents to have her suspend her campaign so that they might “carry on their work uninterrupted” [Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 188])—“implies much about [her] involvement in both educational reform and the suffrage movement” (11).

Webster sees how such frustrations are felt personally, but created socially, through structures and beliefs which always relegated the woman's interests below those of a man's. Self-identifying—albeit ironically—as a British matron...Webster argues humorously and astutely for radical changes in the position of women, domestic social arrangements, and the relations between men and women...She makes powerful the apparently abjected position of the 'housewife' through the application of her analytical intellect. ("British Matron" 131)

Her chosen persona of a British matron is crucial in contributing what Newey terms a "double maneuver" (132); Webster is able to maintain the "value of the feminine role of wifedom" (132) while exposing its injurious disadvantages and encumbrances. In other words, Newey corroborates what Glennis Byron argues—that Webster is expert at "inhabiting the conventional in order to critique it" (Byron 88).

The essays most applicable to our purposes, essays that speak to and condemn the hardships faced by marriageable and/or married women, were written between May and July of 1878. Among them is the previously mentioned "Matrimony as a Means of Livelihood," in which Webster laments, "What is to be really deplored is the number of women who marry to be married, to be 'settled in life,' to have a home and be thought a somebody...Marriage is for them a means of livelihood, and any marriage is better than none" (230-1). Summarizing the unfortunate (and, more importantly, socially compelled) trajectory followed by countless Victorian women, including our three fictional wives (Annunciata, "happiest girl," and Eleanor), Webster enumerates the danger of subverting natural desires to achieve a facade of wifely contentedness:

And where the woman has not succeeded in learning, but only in hoping to learn, what she feels to be a sufficient affection to last her as a wife, or where, having acquired as much affection as suffices for most women who marry for marriage's sake, she is...accepting a position in which her nature cannot but deteriorate. (231-2)

In another piece titled "Husband-Hunting and Match-Making," Webster exposes the contradictory (and thus absurd) expectations foisted upon marriageable women: "Their time is short, in many cases their opportunities are few, and meanwhile they are hampered with difficulties" (*HO* 234). Marriageable women must "wish and not wish; they must by no means give, they must certainly not withhold, encouragement...they must not be frank, they must not be coy...so it goes on, each precept cancelling another, and most of them negative" (234). Unreservedly condemning mercenary marriages, Webster maintains, "Marriage...cannot be transacted according to the principles of demand and supply, nor through the medium of parents or any other accredited agents. That a young woman will have no place in the world unless a husband gives her a home and a purpose for her life is, no doubt, a strong temptation to marriage, but it is not a reason for it" (236). With acerbic, sarcastic wit that reaches a new level of rhetorical efficacy, Webster exposes women's economic disability as the insidious motivator and culprit; she "faults" girls for not possessing "so high a courage as to look forward patiently to the contemned position of the poverty-stricken old maid rather than to marry for the sake of marriage" (237).

From these assertions, combined with the tragic or woeful fates of our three female protagonists (Annunciata, "happiest girl," and Eleanor), one might conclude that

Webster regarded the very institution of marriage as objectionable. After all, in our three fictional works of interest, we seem to be presented with only two prospects, both objectionable and destructive; bourgeois Victorian marriage is depicted as motivated by either “romantic paradigms, or profit” (Olverson 185). In fact, Sister Annunciata suggests just how fixed and inexorable these two options are when she bemoans, “Has God condemned all love except of Him? / Will He have only market marriages / Or sprung from passion fancies soon worn out” (“SA” 549-51). However, it is not the institution itself that Webster dismisses, but rather these two iterations. More importantly, these are not the only two options available and attainable, as suggested by Webster at the end of *A Woman Sold*, and her presentation of an alternative demands further consideration.

It fascinates me how Eleanor may be the “determined heroine” of *A Woman Sold*, but Mary, although given little to no critical consideration or “billing” by Brown, Pionke, and Rigg, is the one who most fully arouses readers’ attention and contemplation. Admittedly, her prosperousness at the end of the closet drama seems entirely problematic to a feminist reading of *A Woman Sold*. She has served as a foil to Eleanor, a model of Victorian propriety and conventionality and a propagator of the patriarchal gender system—and yet, she is the one who ends up happy. Not happy by pretense, stifling her desires and feigning contentment as Eleanor is left doing, but genuinely content. Despite having acquired a newfound agency via her husband’s death and her truth-bearing conversation with Mary, Eleanor chooses to consign herself once more to a life of suppression and performativity. Indeed, we are meant to recognize and applaud that she

at least has a choice now, but *why* Eleanor makes this choice should be the true crux of our interpretive efforts.

It is Mary's account of her relationship with Lionel that specifically hijacks Act II. *A Woman Sold* is powerful and distinctive in that Webster does not merely expose and critique Victorian wifedom and the "bourgeois...ideal of marriage" (Brown 99) for what it was and should not be. More significantly, *A Woman Sold* serves as a fictional antecedent and complement to the bold, progressive sociopolitical essays Webster penned for the *Examiner* (and later compiled to be *A Housewife's Opinions*) in that it offers readers a vision—Webster's vision—of what marriage *should* be. It should not be the performative sham required of and acted out by Sister Annunciata, the speaker of "Happiest Girl," and Lady Boycott. Nor should it be a veneer of passion that obscures the presence of inequities and patriarchal possessiveness, which would have been the reality of a union between Eleanor and Lionel. What Webster advocates for is companionate love, as exemplified by the dynamic between Mary and Lionel. The resolution of *A Woman Sold*—Eleanor's impulse to preserve Mary and Lionel's engagement, despite her own reawakened desires and initial contempt for Mary's depiction of her love—reflects and satisfies Webster's emerging political and social agenda.

The notion of companionate marriage was "of great interest to the Victorians" (42) according to T.D. Olverson, especially after the "public scandals of the Divorce Court in the mid-nineteenth century" (42). John Stuart Mill, a fervent proponent of social and political equality between the sexes, raised the issue of companionate marriage in a debate on the Second Reform Bill (which served to make England's electoral process

more inclusive, at least for males) in 1867, and then again more prominently in his work *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. Commenting on the deplorable status of the Victorian wife, Mills asserts, "Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house" (148). With the "profoundest conviction" (177), Mills promotes the "ideal of marriage" (177) as

two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them—so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development. (177)

The "moral regeneration of mankind" will only occur, according to Mill, with political and social paradigm shifts, when "the most fundamental of the social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice, and when human beings learn to cultivate their strongest sympathy with an equal in rights and in cultivation" (177-8).

Though little is known about Webster's own marriage, it appears, based on her letters to others and her husband's involvement in both her writing career and activism, that it was a happy one²⁵ based on the principles laid out by Mill. We know that Thomas was greatly supportive of his wife's professional aspirations; he served as her business manager and literary agent, as well as, according to Webster in a letter to Edmund Gosse, her "critic, proofreader, and 'foolometre'" (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 20). He even resigned his "lucrative" (39) solicitor's position in Cambridge to move to London in 1870 so that his wife could "mix in literary circles" (122). As Christine Sutphin states,

²⁵ This is the consensus among critics based on the scant information available. See in particular Sutphin's introduction to *Augusta Webster* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000) and Rigg's biography, *Julia Augusta Webster* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009).

Thomas “appears to have been an enlightened man, ready to give up his prestigious position to further his wife’s professional development” (*Augusta* 11).²⁶ Webster and her husband were also “compatible in ways that were essential to a woman of [her] varied interests” (Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster* 20). They attended regular meetings of Mrs. P. R. Taylor’s Pen and Pencil Club together. Thomas edited his wife’s campaign materials when she ran for the London School Board, and he later became a fellow worker (holding minor positions as an appointed representative/liaison). Most importantly, they both were active members of the London Suffrage Society, attesting to Thomas’s support and public advocacy of female equality.

Without a doubt, Augusta and Thomas’s marriage gives credence to Mill’s claim that “numbers of married people even under the present law...live in the spirit of a just law of equality” (83). Mill finishes this thought by affirming, “Such persons ought to support the principles here advocated; of which the only object is to make all other married couples similar to what these are now” (83). It is my contention that this is essentially the pretext for the shift in focus to Mary and the quality of her relationship with Lionel at the end of *A Woman Sold*. To this end, let us return to the point in Act II from which a discussion of companionate love first develops.

After likening her situation to that of the “worn drudge,” Eleanor affirms that she and her husband “were not suited” (II. 434) and that “some more fitting wife” (II. 434) could have loved him—for love, as she sees it, “makes / The only fitness” (II. 436).

²⁶ Patricia Rigg puts Thomas’s forward-thinking support of his wife into perspective through a useful anecdote. She writes, “Nevertheless, he had to negotiate the difficult path of marriage to a successful woman. In a letter to James Dykes Campbell, Arthur Symonds describes meeting Thomas at a party at William Michael Rossetti’s, remarking disparagingly, ‘I was introduced to Mrs. Webster’s husband (poor man, to have such a title—and such a nice old fellow too).’ Thomas was obviously a devoted husband and father, as well as an intelligent, sensible man who willingly participated in his wife’s diverse activities” (*Julia Augusta Webster* 39).

Eleanor then offers a lengthy, hypothetical description of this “more fitting wife” for Sir Joyce:

[O]ne whom years or care
 Had brought little nearer to his age,
 Enough to crave no more than was in him
 Of sympathies and high ideal hopes;
 One who had never loved, or could forget
 How the young love, and could bestow on him
 A fond contended kindness for the sake
 Of his meant kindness to her; such a wife
 Might have enjoyed in him a better calm
 Of meet companionship than I could find,
 Might have shared with him little daily thoughts
 And answered when he talked and not felt dull,
 Nor missed— (II. 436-48)

The vision of marriage submitted here—modeled after the ideas of Mill²⁷ and presently rejected by Eleanor—is not one of unbridled passion or “high ideal hopes,” but rather of “meet companionship,” which is exemplified by shared interests, communication of (and mutual concern for) “little daily thoughts,” and “fond contended kindness.” What

²⁷ Another key (fictional) precedent for this vision of companionate love is the Aurora/Romney marriage in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Once estranged by their disparate wants and needs (his all-consuming immersion in charitable service and her fixed pursuit of unadulterated artistic expression), these two unite in Book IX after time and suffering strip them of their pride and pretensions. Their relationship becomes defined by their emergent respect for (and alignment of) each other's interests and goals, specifically those of service to Man and service to Art.

Webster's own heroine does not yet realize is that this is/should be the preferred vision, but she will soon be persuaded through Mary's counseling and example.

Though it appears at the beginning of Act II that Mary possesses little insight or depth of character, Webster reveals her as more than just a stock target for critique by the end of *A Woman Sold*. Central to this development is Webster's inclusion of a brief but significant back-story for Mary, one that demonstrates her own suffering due to a prior relationship. "Whilst I was loving happily," she discloses, "I learned / That I must love no more. I bade him wed / The mother of his child; and that he did, / And has been worthier since. But, Eleanor, / I suffered" (II. 772-6). And despite her previous urgings for reserve and decorum, even her pretenses are stripped away and her vulnerability bared when, including herself in a collective "we," she admits to the same indoctrination of romantic idealism that binds (pun intended) women together: "And I / Was heavy for the loss of love and hopes / That had been—ah we know what such hopes are" (II. 778-80). Thankfully, though, her fiancé has reversed this sense of loss and, as Mary adds, "Better too than that, / I make him happy—though that means the same" (II. 791-2).

This first suggestion of parity and reciprocity continues as Mary expounds upon her relationship with her fiancé:

And, dear, we seem well paired. We think alike
 On most things, leaving but some needful points
 For controversy lest we should be drowsed
 By nodding constant. Yes-es. We blend well
 In tastes too. (II. 798-802)

Even better, they are similar in their past suffering, for he, too, once experienced “a love / Which darkened into storm and wearied [him] / With tossing long unrest” (II. 802-4).

Mary sees this as a benefit: “Since we have both known / That fret and fevering, ‘tis well for us / To have, in our fixed trust, calm fearless rest” (II. 806-8).²⁸ Though critical attention to Mary and Lionel’s relationship is sparse, Albert Pionke does note that their union is founded in “emotional equilibrium” (480), for they “enjoy emotional self-mastery...in the midst of their obvious attachment to one another” (480).

This description of “calm fearless rest” provokes Eleanor’s immediate and fervent rejection. Without bias or ulterior motives—as this is before she knows who Mary’s fiancé is—Eleanor insists, “Mary, you do not love him! No, you talk / Too soberly. You do not love him. No, / Not with your heart, the very life in you— / Less will not do” (II. 809-12). Three times, she pleads that Mary “must not” (II. 812-3) marry this man because Mary simply cannot fathom the repercussions—to “live as a wife lives / Beside a man who is not *all* to you! / *All, all*, I tell you” (II. 814-6). To Eleanor, love remains (even after—or especially due to—her marriage to Sir Joyce) a romantic ideal. Because she does not sense all-consuming passion in Mary’s words, she deems that there is no love and no prospect of true contentment. Yet, as Webster has already suggested, relationships founded on passion rather than shared values and compatibility—such as Eleanor and Lionel’s—do not fare much better in the end than mercenary marriages. In Act I, Lionel talks of his and Eleanor’s relationship being “some romance of a true love / That thrills the reader through—some rare romance / With your name in it, Eleanor, and

²⁸ Note another instance of the word “fever” (in adjectival form) indicating the impermanence and detriment of passion with no substantiality beneath it.

mine, / And a glad end" (I. 132-4). However, as we have already seen, there is no "glad end"; this brand of love is ultimately not conducive to success or endurance.

Webster refutes this ideal of love in an essay from *A Housewife's Opinions* titled "Yoke-Fellows." This piece relays the story of two fictitious couples, Bill and Jane and George and Martha. Upon both couples arriving at church on the day of their shared wedding, the clergyman informs them that the "banns had got mixed" (198) and there would have to be "three new 'askings in church,' with the right names coupled, before the marriages could take place" (HO 198). Rather than be turned away, the four decide to abide by the banns as they were—Bill would marry Martha and George would marry Jane. They had "talked it over together...and they had settled it would do just as well that way" (198). And "true enough," as Webster adds, "the exchange did just as well" (199).

Webster sees merit to the arrangement decided upon by these "sagacious young people who judged themselves and life rightly" (199). They were "all friends, and came from the same hamlet; each young man could do equally well with either young woman, each young woman could do equally well with either young man" (198-9). In other words, romance (passion) may be advanced by fairy tales and advice books, but mutual admiration, shared interests/expectations, and sameness of mind are crucial to marital contentment. Webster appropriates the very language and imagery of fairy tales in order to undermine their presentation of love:²⁹

There is generally a certain romance about courtships and wedding; but generally it does not go deep. The gilt on the gingerbread does not last, and was never expected to last: the gingerbread is the important part of the

²⁹ Webster does the same in "Matrimony as a Means of Livelihood" when she laments the "spell-bound princess" who "lulled in maiden meditation fancy-free...wait[s] as unconsciously as the Sleeping Beauty in her enchanted palace for the lover who awakens them to the fulness of life" (230).

matter, and the guilt but an embellishment which has to come away and let the substantial stuff be reached. So the superficial romance wears off and is not missed, and a wholesome, stodgy, affection is left for use. (*HO* 199)

Webster ultimately contends that “the great safety lies in the commingling of a secure affection with a certain healthy indifference—indifference is not a fair word for it, but the right one does not exist—which belongs to a respectable married life” (201). While she acknowledges (in “Matrimony...”) that there is a “best ideal” (231) of married love, other than the on-the-spot arrangements of Bill and Martha and George and Jane, she argues (in “Yoke-Fellows”) that “[I]ove, with the wooing left in it, is sensitive and fault-finding passion...keenly aware of coldness or rebuke” (201). In other words, less intense feeling is “less likely to find its end in...disappointment” (231). We certainly witness a glaring demonstration of such pitfalls in Eleanor and Lionel’s relationship.

In this vein of “secure affection” combined with a “healthy indifference,” Mary strikes back at Eleanor’s reservations/criticism with a commanding defense of companionate love and her relationship with her (now-identified) fiancé, Lionel. She counters Eleanor’s misguided petitions for “all, all” with:

Do you think we love
 But with half hearts because our love to us
 Is part of daily life, too known a thing
 To praise or wonder at or analyse?
 We are so sure, so happy, love so well,
 That we forget ‘tis loving, as one breathes
 Pure genial air and never notes one breathes. (II. 816-22)

Mary then proceeds to criticize Eleanor's longing for grand gestures and intense, sweeping emotions, echoing Webster's advice in "Yoke-Fellows" to "like each other...genuinely but not [to] any disturbing extent" (*HO* 201):

You scorn such bright monotony, you'd have
A love like mountain-showers and sunlights mixed,
Dashes of anger but the love light still
Prompt to the eyes. (II. 830-3)

"But wait, dear Eleanor" (II. 833), Mary urges as she brings her lesson/prophecy to a dramatic end,

Till love worth you, that yet makes you more worth
That you may be worth it and him you love,
Comes, as it yet will come, must come, and then
You'll know what a rich thing my sunshine is. (II. 834-7)

She implies that Eleanor will understand the error of her thinking—and find genuine happiness in the "bright monotony"—once she abandons her flawed ideal of passion-driven love.

Conspicuously, Eleanor offers no retort this time. Within the 26-line span of Mary's "Do you think we love..." speech, Eleanor goes from pleading, "Mary, you do not love him!" (II. 809) to conceding, "Yes, I know, / I understand, no doubt you love him well, / And he loves you. For your sake I am glad" (II. 841-3). Some might be inclined to read Eleanor's complete reversal of opinion as suspect and disingenuous due to the speed at which it happens. However, Webster brilliantly undercuts any doubts about Eleanor's earnestness and sincerity by using form to her advantage once again. Upon

Mary's exit from Boycott Hall, emphasized by the only stage direction in the entire drama, Eleanor delivers a final monologue to close out *A Woman Sold*. The monologue provides confirmation of Eleanor's intentionality and sincerity, that despite the pain it will cause her and the happiness she will have to feign—at least initially, for even she admits that the pain “will not last for ever” (II. 909)—she means to honor and preserve the “fixed trust” (II. 808) and “calm fearless rest” (II. 808) that Mary has found with Lionel:

For she must not know.

I will not have her peace one moment stirred.

.....

'Tis best so

And comforts me. (II. 896-897; II. 903-904)

The intended victor of this debate, this ideological campaign to define and substantiate the ideal model of love and marriage, is indeed Mary; her rhetorical efficacy is what inspires Eleanor's self-sacrificial decision and promotes Webster's real-world advocacy of companionate marriage.

If, as Albert Pionke proposes, some readers are “unlikely to be satisfied by this final solution” (481) to the Eleanor-Lionel-Mary triangle in *A Woman Sold*, let us be reminded of Webster's warning—imparted in both “Sister Annunciata” and “The Happiest Girl in the World”—of what happens when marriage is founded on something other than “shared ideals and reciprocal admiration” (Olverson 45). A union between Eleanor and Lionel would not have been a “marriage of true minds” (Webster, *HO* 231), but a union between Mary and Lionel promises to be much closer to the ideal—Webster's

ideal—of companionate love. (For this reason, one could argue that Eleanor's sacrifice is not really a sacrifice at all, but rather a blessing.) And if the fate of our "determined heroine" seems at first circumscribed to a stereotypical feminine role, especially with Eleanor's revived commitment to "pretty cordial acting" (II. 905), it should no longer appear so once we consider how performativity changes in function and causality at the end of the closet drama. Indeed, performativity proves to be purely insidious and debilitating in "Annunciata," "Happiest Girl," and even *A Woman Sold* (within the confines of Eleanor's marriage to Sir Joyce). Yet, at the end of Act II, Eleanor's "rare smiling part" (II. 904) serves a higher purpose that promises to yield transformative rather than injurious results—preserving Mary and Lionel's union so that it may serve as a model and source of hope for marriageable women. Finally, we must not assume or deduce that Eleanor's importance wanes as Mary's importance grows; the two are not inversely related. Specifically, we must not overlook how Eleanor gains something valuable in retaining her status as widow. Through her "newly empowered subject position as a financially and legally independent widow" (Pionke 481), Eleanor possesses "sufficiently unfettered agency to carry out her plan" (481). Thus, in spite of what she *may* have lost, she has acquired an ability (or, more accurately, a previously withheld right) that Webster wishes for all Victorian women—to "think her own thoughts" and carry them through to fruition. Thus, Eleanor is, in her own right, a powerful source and inspiration for feminist progress and achievement.

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